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Understanding and comparison of East and West Philosophies

Abstract

The author stressed and emphasized some of the most interesting papers which were presented during the 11th East-West Philosophers' Conference: "Place."

Keywords: place, philosophy, political power, exploration.

The 11th East-West Philosophers' Conference: "Place" took place at the University of Hawaii from May 25 to May 31, 2016. It was stated that humanity is no different from other species. Humanity also purposefully transforms space, but is not unique in doing so. Other species also reshape the spaces they occupy to serve their purposes. What seemed to be uniquely human is the disposition to qualitatively transform spaces into places that are charged with distinctive kinds of significance.

Banka Rafal (Poland) presented "*Confucian Meditations: Localising the Philosophising Mind*" He stated that the most philosophers agree in that the ideas they convey possess objective, or at least, intersubjective status. The strength of the conviction is based on the assumption that a philosophising subject is located in the most neutral, culturally insensitive place, where a quasi-God's-eye perspective can be assumed and universal judgements can be passed. One of the most famous exemplifications can be found in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where the 'perfect vacuum' of suspended reality enables Descartes to answer most fundamental questions. This metaphilosophical condition can be challenged by an alternative offered by Confucianism, where the subject is specifically located in a multiple-level context and presents a holistic (not universal) perspective. In his paper, he argued for the Confucian localised-concrete subject as a legitimate departure point of philosophical investigations. His main argument consisted in showing that the subject contextualisation is an indispensable propensity in cognitive pro-

cesses. He constructed it by referring to enactivism, which concurrently provides a linkage to viewing the Confucian conception of subject from the perspective of empirical sciences.

Buben Adam (The Netherlands) was the author of the paper *“Finding a Place for Transhumanist Immortality in Ancient Indian Philosophy”* According to him transhumanism has much in common with religion as traditionally conceived. Most notably, the range of technologically optimistic views held by transhumanists shares with many religions a longing for transcendence of our presently frail and limited situation. In contrast to the doctrines of many traditional religions, however, transhumanist salvation did not come from divine intervention, but solely from our own ingenuity. Nonetheless, there is a growing number of voices arguing that shared interests in the elimination of suffering, the immersion of individual minds in a universal intelligence, or the remaking of the universe itself, indicate that certain construals of transhumanism might actually be continuous with certain religious traditions. He focused on one common transhumanist goal - personal immortality - that seems inherently opposed to the core philosophical foundations of at least two major religions. Ancient Hindu and Buddhist philosophy suggests that any yearning for extension of individual personalities will ultimately be problematic. On the more superficial understandings of these traditions it may be possible to accept even this transhumanist goal, but at their most philosophical, they teach detachment from the ordinary sense of selfhood.

Budin Gerhard (Austria) discussed his issues in the paper *“Place Metaphors in E-learning and E-science – Empirical Transcultural Explorations and Their Critical Socio-epistemic Reflections”* He explained that space metaphors in general and place metaphors in particular play a crucial role in the conceptualization, design and the discourses of the Internet and the World Wide Web. McLuhan put spatial metaphors at the center of his conceptualization of new media. Based on and inspired by his pioneering work and the resulting and widely adopted conceptual-metaphorical framework, the WWW further developed more productive spatial metaphors, and more precisely place metaphors for various user scenarios. In E-Learning and E-Science, for instance, we nowadays use “platforms”, “repositories”, virtual learning “rooms”, digital “libraries”, work “environments”, collaborative “laboratories” (or more concisely in the blending “collaboratories”, etc. as “places” where teachers and students, as well as scientists “meet” and work together.

For the last 10 years we (at the University of Vienna) have been carrying out a number of research projects co-financed by the European Union in the areas of collaborative E-Learning and E-Science. The empirical case study we are currently carrying out focus on the following research questions: how do students, teachers and researchers from different cultures (at the Center for Translation Studies we teach in 14 different languages covering major language communities in all continents world-wide) react to and behave in such virtual “class rooms” and virtual work “environments” and collaborative “platforms”? How do the spatial conceptualizations of E-Learning and E-Science shape, influence, and change their learning

and researching processes? The approach in this investigation included a socio-epistemic perspective looking at the “communities of practice”, i.e. learning communities and research communities in their joint and interactive work.

One of these projects they have participated in is called “Open Discovery Space” (ODS) (see: <http://opendiscoveryspace.eu/consortium> for the list of project partners). It is directed towards schools all over Europe and beyond and is thus of a trans-cultural orientation. Yet the project is multi-lingual and multi-cultural, taking into account different learning and teaching cultures in schools in different countries.

Chennoufi Ridha A. (Tunisia) presented “*Territory, Tribe, and Political Power: A Different View on Political Space in the Maghreb*” The object of her paper was to determine on the basis of Ibn Khaldun’s writings the role territorial stakes played in the formation of the modern state. Indeed, to this day, the theory of political power as applied on Islamic lands is essentially centered on the notions of clan-based ‘solidarity’ (*‘asabiyya*) and “community” (*umma*). As a result, the territorial factor has been occultated under the pretense that Kabyle, Arab, or Muslim societies, other than Western societies, do not define themselves in relation to the City. This allegedly explains and justifies that it is border conflicts which prevented and still prevent the so-called Arabic-Islamic Maghrib (West) and Mashriq (East) to mutually recognize each other as sovereign states. Her paper challenged this view by showing that Ibn Khaldun developed a conception of space, territory, and political power that is diametrically opposed to the Westphalian one, and, more importantly, of great actuality. Suffice it to say, the political conflicts igniting the world incessantly since the end of the cold war seem to converge towards the constitution of large geopolitical spaces defined much more in terms of cultural identity than the fundamental rights of individuals.

Cheng Sinkwan (Sweden) in his paper “*Problematizing the Liberal Notion of ‘Self’ via Aristotle and Confucius*” used the classical Greek and Chinese traditions’ *common incompatibility* with modern liberal notion of “right” to explore the *commonalities* between them, and examine how two civilizations apart from each other could nonetheless share a similar idea of “self” giving rise to similar notions of “right.” This served as the starting point in his search for a new “right” that could better accommodate both Eastern and Western traditions. Note, however, that while exploring the similarities between the ancient Greek and Chinese thoughts - represented in his paper respectively by Aristotle and Confucius - his paper also investigated their critical differences. Both Aristotle and Confucius prioritized the collective before the individual.

Fech Andrej (Germany) stated that in the philosophy of the *Laozi*, location and directionality play an important role and are invested with a wide range of meanings. The main idea of the text in his paper “*Place in the Philosophy and Biography of Laozi*” according to which the ruler should act in accordance with the principles of the Way entails that the former has to emulate the motions/take up the position of the latter. The ensuing moral teaching commanding the ruler to lower himself

in front of his subordinates challenges the traditional understanding of human agency in the world.

Besides showing how the characteristic understanding of the spatial arrangement of the universe and the state influenced the philosophical teaching of the text, including its concept of time, he also would like to address the alleged biographical account of Laozi in this talk. According to it, Laozi left China after having become discouraged with the political decline of the Zhou dynasty. Garrison James (Austria) presented “*Does Cultural Incommensurability Measure Up? A Consideration of Nearness and Distance in Intercultural Philosophy*” There was the need for self-defense, not uncommon when presenting intercultural philosophy to a wider audience, as questions of cultural incommensurability inevitably arise. Is comparative philosophy legitimate? Is intercultural? Is any type of global philosophy possible? Are the cultural, terminological, and perspectival differences simply too great?

What then is to be done? There has to be a way of recognizing real differences without giving into the pernicious logic of presuming separation. How would it then make sense to talk of cultures having conversations if the fallacy of misplaced *cultural* concreteness is taken seriously? How can things be intercultural if there are no cultures as such? How is it possible to rescue basic talk of cultures more generally and avoid somehow implying that all talk about Chinese philosophy, French culture, or American literature is in some way essentialist, racist, and/or nationalist? Answering such questions is no mean task. There needs to be a type of intercultural philosophy which does not lapse into pernicious abstractions of cultures, and which still retains the ability to speak of this culture or that as the case may be. There needs to be a way of talking about world philosophy as a unity while respecting philosophical worldviews as a dynamic manifold where the constituent elements are fluid, yet insistent particulars and not simply so much misplaced concreteness.

The approach here takes up Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s rhizomatic method, Franz Martin Wimmer’s polylog model, and Roger Ames’ observations on interpretation as negotiation to reconsider place, nearness, and distance in light of the questions that dog intercultural philosophy. Recognizing the sorites paradox, the response here shifts away from the incommensurability question’s underlying notions of objective purity that quantify self-sameness in seemingly monolithic “heaps” of time, place, and culture. Instead, this approach emphasizes self-consciousness of the necessary impurity of *all* perspectives in any multi-point, non-hierarchical conversation that would seek to appreciate the *qualities*, not of abstracted and quantified cultures, but of individual voices *within* dynamic and constitutively pluralistic philosophical cultures.

The issue of the psychophysical integrity of human beings found several interesting articulations in the classical Indian philosophical texts, including those of Sāṃkhya-Yoga tradition as Jakubczak Marzenna (Poland) stated in his paper “*Locating the Self: Between Memory, Attention and Discrimination*.” A highly debatable question remained, however: where the self, the subject of perception and volition

is located, since the principle of consciousness is said to be embedded neither in body nor in mind. To define the epistemic status of the rudimentary self-representation the author discussed in detail how the memory traces of the past deeds (*saṃskāra*), focused attention (*ekāgratā*), and the ability to distinguish between 'I' and non-'I' (*vivekakhyaṭi*) mutually condition one another according to Sāṃkhya and Yoga thinkers. While doing so, the presenter also referred to some contemporary studies of the cognitive, emotional and volitional functions developed thanks to attention regulation and monitoring meditation.

Kobi Kabalek (Israel) discussed his paper "*The Experience of Movement in Holocaust Testimonies*," where scholars of the Holocaust assigned only limited importance to phenomena that exceed clearly drawn boundaries of ghettos, camps, towns, and shtetls, thus testifying to the lingering focus on bounded locations in this field of study. However, the Holocaust did not only take place within fixed containers of violence, but also beyond them and in the movement between them. The journeys to and from ghettos and camps introduced the Jews to new landscapes and populations, stirred different feelings among the deportees, and changed their understanding of what was taking place. These assessments and expectations, in turn, played a role in the ways in which subsequent occurrences were perceived and influenced the decision making process upon arrival to the sites of persecution. The paper examined depictions of movement as constituting temporary, yet significant, spaces of meaning and point to the functions of these movements in structuring survivors' postwar narrations of the Holocaust.

The paper "*Place of Africa in the Current World Order*" presented by Kelbessa Workineh (Ethiopia) examined the place of Africa in the current world order, and shows the importance of developing more inclusive ethical and epistemological foundations that are required to reconceptualise and remap our current situation and contribute to the emergence of a more prosperous, just and peaceful world in the 21st century. Africa and other 'developing' countries have very little influence and voice in today's global policy-making forums. His paper stressed that the voices of 'developing' countries have important contributions to local, national and international development and environmental agendas, and can help to remap the world in a way that makes sense to 'us'. Thus, what are needed are fundamental changes in the structures of global power such that the 'weaker' countries that represent the vast majority of humanity are no longer weak and the 'powerful' countries that represent a tiny minority of humanity are no longer powerful. The paper suggested that humanity as a whole must develop alternative attitudes towards the current world order. Thus, instead of searching for short-term profits or looking only for immediate gratification, TNCs and other powerful players in the current world order should respect the knowledge, need, aspiration and voice of 'developing' countries.

In the article "*The Wisdom of Place: Lithuanian Philosophical Philotopy of Arvydas Šliogeris*" the phenomenon of Lithuanian philosophical philotopy is presented. Kučinskas Justas and Naglis Kardelis (Lithuania) stated that philotopy, literally meaning a love of place, is a term first defined by Simone Weil, is also found in

Arvydas Šliogeris philosophy, where philotopy acquires a specifically Lithuanian dimension. Philotopy in Arvydas Šliogeris thinking referred to a type of philosophy, which is deeply rooted in individual's unique and finite experience of particular things found in a specially defined and very particular place, usually one's closest environment, where one is born or permanently settled. Philotopy is also a meta-reflection of the way of thinking about and being in the world which is defined by that particular place. Philotopy as a way of noticing the importance which the nearness and particularity of place has to one's thinking and being is itself, as we might say, connected and rooted in a particular place – the landscape and history of Lithuania. Arvydas Šliogeris, the founder and leader of modern Lithuanian philosophy, pointed to philotopical inclinations of Lithuanian culture and foresees philotopy as the probable direction of Lithuanian philosophical thought. Therefore, the philosophical philotopy in Arvydas Šliogeris's sense can be summarized as "the metaphysics of the homeland."

The authors of this article suggested that Lithuanian philotopy calls for reassessment of meaning and purpose of philosophy as such in the context of the 21st century realities. The question of the very essence and purpose of philosophy is itself asked from specifically defined place. In the authors' opinion, the project of Lithuanian philosophical philotopy might be viewed as a contribution of Lithuanian experience to the global debate on what philosophy is and in what ways is it relevant to the pressing issues of the world today. A way of pursuing a global issue from a deeply rooted local perspective becomes crucially important in the context of globalized science, where the demand for internationalization and diversity paradoxically dilutes the ground of diversity itself – the truly local perspective. Lithuanian philotopy invites philosophers to pursue the mission to draw people's attention to their specific experiences of particular things found in particular places.

Philotopy is not determined to find The Truth, but only to reflect the singular truth of a very specific and defined experience of nearness of non-human reality of things and place. The ability to attach to what is dear, the determination to care and nurture the particular place is also a basis of engaged and courageous thinking, which makes possible a truly authentic agency, authorship and a real meaningful dialogue. The truth of unique experience of particular things and its reflection paradoxically becomes the only way of true inter-human communication. Firstly, it is because every human existence, however different it may be, is always attached to an experience happening in particular places. Secondly, it is the experience of non-human things (however different they may be), rather than the language, that gifts people with the experience of reality. The reality of things is the common ground that any further communication and being together can be built on. The authors of the article suggest that in this sense philotopy allows a possibility of authentic, locally rooted existence and thinking compatible with global awareness. In fact it is even argued that the rootedness in particular place is the necessary condition of true ecology, where the responsibility for a particular place is the only basis of consciousness of the bigger whole.

The authors also note that philotopical approach is not new in the history of philosophy. The birth of philosophy is related to the very particular place and time, which is ancient Greece, and it is also related to a then more general approach that the wisdom of a finite human being in defined circumstances and places, although not equal to the wisdom of gods, has value and is worth pursuing. In terms of the evolution of philotopical thinking Arvydas Šliogeris takes a second step of philotomy by actually allowing us to see that the limits of a human being, especially the experience of the finitude and sacredness of a particular place, are actually the basis of our possibility to face the two biggest challenges of the world today: our inability to live together and the profound disconnectedness from our particular living place, manifesting itself, inter alia, in the global environmental crisis.

For the 11th East-West Philosophers' Conference were invited panel and paper proposals related to the theme of "Place." Of special interest were panels and papers that explored how places emerge through the sustained, shared practices of mutually-responsive and mutually-vulnerable actors. Subthemes included: the place of the personal, including issues of identity-construction and privacy; place and culture, including considerations of how cultures shape and are shaped by relationships with natural and built environments; places of pilgrimage, including places charged with political or cultural, as well as, religious significance; places of memory; places of mediation, including social and mass media; place and the political, including places of justice and places of both conflict and peace; trading places, including the places of entrepreneurship and concerns about the place of equity in economics; and the place of philosophy, addressing issues about the real and ideal roles of philosophy in contemporary society.