

INTERCULTURAL PHILOSOPHY INVESTIGATING THE MIND IN EAST-WEST-DIALOGUE

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I am going to tackle the question of intercultural philosophy from within my field of research, which is philosophy of mind, more precisely theories of embodiment that combine phenomenological approaches and neuroscientific results. In this field the question of interculturality is quite intimidating. Approaching texts from Buddhist or other eastern traditions means being confronted with a variety of languages that cannot be understood if one has not studied ancient Asian languages. The next obstacle is that one usually has to deal with texts from religious backgrounds, which need a very careful interpretation to understand the theoretical implications. This seems a huge hurdle to intercultural thinking to say the least. Even reading the translations is not very helpful since without deeper knowledge of the background and language, interpretations are often no more than educated guesses.

So one could ask: Why bothering reading texts from other traditions? We have come so far in researching consciousness and the mind. And already there are two cultures within the western tradition that compete and have to be mediated: The philosophical tradition and the scientific branches of Neuroscience and Cognitive Science. Both ways to research consciousness require not only translation in order to communicate with each other, they are already in themselves structured interdisciplinary or have different approaches fueling different discourses. The whole scenery seems like a prism of different perspectives already within western science.

The gap between humanities and the empirical sciences or life sciences is only one of them. Both fields are in itself structured by differences. And furthermore the humanities and social sciences adopt the neuroscientific paradigm within their own territory. There is a big wave of disciplines that add the prefix neuro- to their names and start new branches such as Neurophilosophy, Neurosociology, Neurotheology and many more. Here a new culture of science arises, that is a hybrid of empirical sciences and humanities or social sciences. One could easily say that this is a form of scientific interculturality.

It is a question indeed how we should define interculturality. Something being thought or done intercultural seems to be a very positive thing. But when do we really think or work in an intercultural way? When does something count as another culture? Does interculturality always entail other languages, other cultures of thought? And if so, how could someone working in Philosophy and not being linguist successfully realize an intercultural approach? An even more complicated: How to choose the traditions that could contribute to a certain question from the wide range of possible ideas and discourses? These are questions I do not have answers for. I will limit my considerations to one example I found very helpful in understanding certain problems in my field of research.

The problem of consciousness is tackled from two different perspectives. Neuroscience and cognitive sciences predominantly use third-person-data, which are gathered in various measuring, observing and imaging techniques. Some philosophers like Patricia Churchland or Thomas Metzinger work on the philosophical implications of those findings and opt for a naturalization of consciousness, for the acknowledgement that we are in fact our brains. There are other thinkers, who see a methodological problem in this account. These

mainly phenomenological informed thinkers such as Alva Noë or Evan Thompson hold that the perspective of first-person-experience needs to be integrated in scientific investigations of consciousness. Thompson speaks of the primacy of experience because first-person-experience is what defines consciousness and furthermore scientists cannot abstract from using their experience to investigate consciousness.

This is the reason why Thompson argues that we need a methodological approach to investigate first-person-experience and henceforth use it for interpreting third-person-data. In Western philosophy Edmund Husserl has developed the phenomenological method to investigate consciousness and intentionality. This method has been already widely deployed in interdisciplinary projects, where neuroscientists and philosophers join forces. Prominent thinkers in this area are Francisco Varela, Daniel Dennett or Thomas Fuchs in Germany.

In contemporary scientific investigations another tradition becomes more and more important. This is the Eastern contemplative tradition. Meditation is a practice that leads to the capability of observing one's own mind more carefully than in usual everyday life situations. Trained meditators and even more Buddhist monks develop an extremely refined sense of the fine-grained shifts in attention and modes of consciousness. These rich forms of experience serve as heuristic means in the interpretation of third-person-data in neuroscientific investigations. There is a growing number of researchers that work in this interdisciplinary field.

Another way to delve into Eastern contemplative knowledge is to read the old texts from the various traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism or Confucianism. To do so, one needs to rely on experts that can mediate this old

knowledge and translate it into a language understandable by Western scholars. This is complex process and there are more and more researchers, who engage in this endeavor. One of them is Evan Thompson, a Canadian Philosopher with additional background in Asian Studies. In his recent book on "Waking, Dreaming, Being" (2015) he brings neuroscientific investigations, Western philosophy and contemplative approaches into dialogue. The strength of this intercultural investigation into the modes of consciousness lies in the neutral way, in which Thompson explores the different fields. He shows, how the ancient Buddhist texts can inform western science and enter a real dialogue beyond religious or ideological constraints. His reading of Buddhist epistemological and metaphysical thought shows that the contemplative traditions contain a wide range of descriptions and theories of modes of consciousness that add to Western thought in a surprising way. These text sometimes even seem to mediate between Western philosophy and empirical science.

These kinds of investigations need expertise and an ability to understand both sides. But with growing interest in other traditions of thought also the number researcher grows who dedicate their work to bridging these gaps and communicating these otherwise hardly accessible fields of wisdom. This tendency hopefully will result in more opportunities for Eastern-Western dialogues and mutual inspiration.