

Report on the
International East-West Philosophy Conference
 (Third Regional)
In Conjunction with the Australasian Association of
Philosophy Annual Conference
July 9th-12th, 1992, Brisbane, Australia

Nietzsche boldly suggested that the law of contradiction is not an absolute: entities can be not themselves but something else as well. As if to confirm this dictum, philosophers and others meeting in Brisbane last July attended the third regional conference of Philosophy East and West (University of Hawaii), the major co-sponsor, but at the same time their deliberations constituted as well the second conference of the Asian and Comparative Philosophy Society (Australasia) and also, in their early stages, the conclusion to the conference of the Australasian Association of Philosophy (the other co-sponsor), which began a few days before. Participants were drawn from North America, Hong Kong, Singapore, India, New Zealand, and various universities in Australia.

Proceedings began on the evening of July 9th with a meeting chaired by R. Pargetter, President of the AAP, at which J.N. Mohanty of Temple University delivered a paper seeking to transcend the notion that Indian philosophy is practical and has no conception of pure theory. Australasian philosophers present who had never given much attention to eastern thought found his approach very stimulating and a case convincingly argued. They were offered the opportunity to find out more about the east on the next day, when there were East-West papers parallel to sessions of the AAP Conference. As if to press further the possibility of transcendental philosophy, a paper on 'Intersubjectivity and Transcendental Subjectivity' by D P Chattopadhyaya (Jadavpur) was read in absentia by J N Mohanty who engaged in an animated discussion with the audience.

On Friday evening, a comparison of the thought of the Mahayana Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna with that of deconstructionism was offered by I.W. Mabbett (Monash); this was billed as a presidential address on behalf of the Asian and Comparative Philosophy Society, which enabled the speaker in his official capacity, before beginning his paper, to express thanks to P. Bilimoria for his assiduous and successful work in organising the conference on a distant shore for all the sponsors. However, since the Society does not yet have any constitution or, a fortiori, any president, this capacity had to be deconstructed, or placed sous rature, as soon as the session was over.

A theme taken up by the East-West contributions to the conference was the philosophical analysis of emotions, and this was directly addressed by a number of papers: Padmasiri de Silva (Singapore) on Buddhist and Western perspectives upon emotion; Robert Solomon (University of Texas at Austin) on love and justice; Purushottama Bilimoria (Deakin) on the ethics of emotions from a cross-cultural perspective; Justin Oakley (Monash University) on emotions, authenticity and the self; Gerald Ericksen (St Olaf's College) on emotions on the path of Zen., and Karyn Lai on friendship in Confucius.

As these examples illustrate, topics discussed mostly though not all adopted comparative approaches to eastern and western thought. Both Indian and Chinese philosophy were well represented, with some intriguing aspects of Japanese thought also presented. - e.g. Tom Kasulis (Ohio State) on sushi and science in Japan; Rosemary Mercer (Massey) on Baien on the Real; and John Haynes (Bond) unravelling the koan. A handful of papers focused on specialist treatment of philosophical issues from a number of perspectives - e.g. Roy Perrett (Massey) on Hindu ethics; Peter Forrest (New England) on the pluralist predicament; Kathleen Higgins (Texas-Austin) on ethnomusicology; Michael Levine (Western Australia) on evil and pantheism; Jocelyn Dunphy-Blomfield on suffering in Western philosophy; Karttikeya Patel on negation in Nagarjuna; J L Shaw on belief-sentences in Nyaya; John Patterson on ecology in Maori tradition; Roger Ames on reasoning and imagining in Confucius; and Michael R. Martin (Hong Kong) on ritual action in Confucius.

Kipling was wrong: in many ways east and west were successfully brought together by Lin Min (Waikato) speaking on functional harmony and the Chinese idea of certainty; this was qualified by David Hall (Texas-El Paso) who called for truth as a test case for cultural comparison. To add to the spirit of harmony (or harmony of spirits) receptions were provided, by courtesy of Thomas Nelson Publishers and Philosophy East & West. When the convenors and sponsors of the conference have worked out the best way of bringing out proceedings of the conference, you will be able to read the papers (or a select few) in better detail.

ASIAN THOUGHT CENTRE

At a special business meeting on July 11th, the conference considered the merits of a proposal to seek sponsorship for a Centre for Crosscultural Studies in Australia - on the model of the East-West Center in Hawai'i. There was agreement that such an institute structured on a collaborative basis could perform a valuable function in conducting liaison between activities carried on in many different institutions and supplementing the present instrumental Australian interest in Asian societies with a more enlightened attention to their culture and philosophy. Various suggestions about practicalities were made. A plan of action was drawn up to seek immediate support across interested institutions for a Centre for Asian and Crosscultural Thought that might, in the initial stages, have its operational base in the Melbourne region. It remains to be seen what sort of sponsorship can be found.

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Postscript: The conference attracted media coverage in 'The Australian' (Higher Education Supplement) 15 July and 29 July; on Radio Australia, and 'Insight' Radio National, ABC.