

## **Eastern Philosophies of Education: Buddhist, Hindu, Daoist and Confucian readings of**

### **Plato's cave**

Dr David Lewin (University of Strathclyde) and Dr Oren Ergas (Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

It is not possible to provide a comprehensive account of the educational philosophies and theories that fall within the wide-ranging rubric of 'Eastern philosophy of education'. This disclaimer acknowledges the need to be selective, and so in what follows we have chosen to focus on certain Eastern traditions that have seemed to provide the most enduring and substantive contributions to educational thinking. This inclusionary/exclusionary task should not be understood as disavowing other potentially important contributions and traditions (e.g. Shintoism, Sikhism, Jainism, Baha'i) nor that the categories 'Eastern' and 'tradition' can be offered without significant reservation.

Furthermore, the reader would be faced with a bewildering array of ideas without a conceptual frame with which to interpret less familiar contexts. We employ Plato's allegory of the cave as the methodological and pedagogical vehicle to frame and to drive the discussion that follows because it allows us to explore certain key ontological, epistemological and ethical features within our selected Eastern pedagogies, providing the balance between meaningful encounter and coherent interpretation. If philosophy is concerned with what it means to be human, then philosophers of education are sometimes said to take up the question of what it means to *become* human: humanization. Our traditions define humanization through a set of practices and/or understandings. Thus, we will focus our attention both on the goal and the practices and processes by which the goal might be achieved. Our chapter includes three parts: the first part will briefly introduce key elements of

Plato's allegory of the cave. Part two will include four sections that examine Buddhism, Hinduism, Daoism and Confucianism in turn. It is important to note however, that each of these traditions is more of a tree with several branches, reflecting diverse schools of thought. This general difficulty becomes severe when discussing Buddhism and Hinduism (the former more appropriately conceived as Buddhisms and the latter a broad term that includes several belief systems), requiring us to select specific teachings/aspects within each tradition. Part three will offer some brief statements that may be surmised from our analysis, pointing to shared features of an 'Eastern philosophy of education'.

## PART 1

### **1. Plato's cave allegory**

The allegory of the cave appears at the beginning of the seventh book of Plato's *Republic* (514a-520a).<sup>1</sup> The allegory presents a dualism between ignorance and knowledge, and an ascent of the mind that has ontological, epistemological, and ethical significance. The process of escape and return to the cave makes the allegory richly symbolic for educationalists.

Socrates likens the human condition, "in respect of education and its lack" (514a), to that of prisoners captive in a cave. The cave represents the sensual, tangible world. It is the only world that these prisoners know since they are shackled in such a way that their heads face the cave wall onto which shadows are projected. Behind the prisoners is a fire, and between the fire and the prisoners is a walkway with a low wall, behind which people walk carrying objects or puppets "of men and other living things" (514b). Having no idea of what is going

---

<sup>1</sup> Since the cave allegory follows Plato's discussion of the metaphor of the sun (507b-509c) and the divided line (509d-511e), it seems plausible that the metaphor of the sun sets out our ontological condition, the divided line a methodological interpretation of stages of knowledge, and that the concern of the cave is primarily epistemological of the process of moving from ignorance to knowledge.

on behind them, the prisoners know only what they see, which they take to be reality. However, their blindness is twofold. Not only are they unaware of the false nature of the shadows, they have no idea that there is a real world that exists outside the cave. The allegory goes on to elaborate how one of the prisoners is forced to turn his eyes towards the fire that is casting the shadows. He is then pulled further toward the cave entrance, and taken outside of the cave, leading to the dual realization of Truth that is at one and the same time the falsity of the cave-world. The freed prisoner is Plato's ideal 'educated person' – the philosopher that has escaped the world of temporary, constantly changing appearances and has realized the world of ideal forms that are eternal, absolute and unchanging Truths. The freed prisoner then returns to try, unsuccessfully, to educate his former inmates of the poverty of their condition.

The most common reading of the allegory is dualist in which the sensual world is one of ignorance, and the world outside the cave illuminated by the light of the sun is of reason and true knowledge. Metaphors of the ascent of the mind from ignorance to knowledge are a common trope within the Western tradition, found, for example, in Moses' ascent and encounter with Yahweh on Mount Sinai in Exodus, as well as the Neoplatonic influence on Western mystical theology in figures such Augustine, Bonaventure and others (Turner 1995). Such metaphors of ascent from shadows to light seem to affirm a dualism between body and mind, where the world of ideas and reason endures, while the body and the sensual realm in general is destined to pass away. The idea that true being exists in a timeless transcendent realm can be detected in most forms of religious and philosophical expression. Since Nietzsche, Western philosophers have been increasingly suspicious of the identity between being and the timeless, though Eastern traditions, as we shall see, also have varied and complex relations to the dualism behind the ascent from body to mind (or, relatedly, from matter to spirit). In general terms, Buddhism and Hinduism lend themselves more directly to images of ascent from the mutable to the immutable yet in ways that challenge the

substantiality of the dualism of the cave allegory. Consequently, the allegory of the cave will be used in different ways, sometimes as illustrative, and other times as a contrast against which Eastern ideas can be explored. The main questions we will attempt to address in this reading 'with and against' the cave allegory will be: What are the problems of the human condition such that require education (in the cave allegory's terms, what does each tradition present as the state of being a prisoner? What characterizes our cave-world)? What kind of practices (educative path/curriculum) are offered to ameliorate this problem and what are their aims (corresponding with, what parallels the philosophers' way out of the cave, the nature of the world outside the cave, and the philosophers' ethical choice to return to the cave and free the prisoners)?

Interpretations of the ethical themes found within the cave allegory are varied and complex. On the face of it, the good life seems to entail an escape from the cave such that the form of the good, symbolized by the sun, is apprehended directly. It should be remembered that, in Plato's allegory, the philosopher who is freed returns to the cave in order to free the others who remain trapped. This final aspect of the story speaks of an important ethical call, but also of an educational task. Having offered a brief characterization of Plato's allegory, we now move to examine our four Eastern traditions in order to see the ways in which they relate to the story.

## PART 2

### **2.1 Buddhism: The cave as a creation of the mind**

The interest in Eastern philosophies of education in the passing decades is becoming more noticeable (Eppert & Wang, 2008; Ergas & Todd, 2016) yet within these traditions it is Buddhism that seems to be drawing the most attention (Hattam, 2004; Hyland, 2014; Todd, 2015). The reasons for this specific interest are diverse and cannot be elaborated here. However, we will mention two important aspects that help locate what we intend to offer here: a) Buddhism is essentially an educative tradition (Thurman, 2006). Its foundational teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths, are structured and organized in a way that makes it, at least theoretically, applicable to a direct discussion of ontological, epistemological, existential and ethical questions that lie at the heart of education. b) The dramatic rise in the contemporary research of mindfulness practice and its growing applications in schools invite both the examination of the roots of the practice within Buddhism, and a philosophical perspective on the ways in which such *meditative* practice and its contemporary interpretations are shaping educational theory and practice (O'Donnell, 2015).

### *2.1.1 Background*

Buddhism begins with Siddhattha Gotama (not yet the Buddha) who lived between 563 to 483 BCE. The Buddha was raised as a prince yet at the age of twenty-nine he set out to live as an ascetic, renouncing his luxurious life and leaving his wife and child. This was the consequence of a series of life-changing encounters, sending him away in search of an answer to 'why we suffer?'. For six years, the Buddha roamed India with groups of ascetics, practicing various kinds of meditations, and yogic practices, fasting to near death, yet to no avail. Disappointed yet determined, he left his group and sat to meditate vowing to continue the practice until he found the answer he sought. Throughout the night he meditated until he became the 'Buddha' – the awakened one. What did he awaken from? What did the Buddha

find that night and what does it have to do with education and philosophy of education? What parallels do we find between the Buddha, Socrates and the cave allegory?

It is important to begin by saying that the Buddha did not initiate *Buddhism*. After his enlightenment, he spent the rest of his life teaching, yet Buddhism took its more organized form only in the centuries that followed as the Buddha's teachings were written. This led to the development of different schools of thought to the point at which there is no one Buddhism but rather many different and diverse Buddhisms (Gethin, 1998). A common division includes early Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism (from which Vajrayana as well as Zen Buddhism emerged). In our analysis, we will focus on fundamental teachings that are usually accepted by all Buddhist schools of thought.

### 2.1.2 *The human condition*

The foundational teaching of Buddhism to which all its diverse schools of thought subscribe is known as the Four Noble Truths that is repeated a number of times throughout the Buddhist Pali canon.<sup>2</sup> The Buddhist tradition at times compares the Buddha to a physician in the way he articulated The Four Noble Truths revealing a structure of a medical diagnosis (Gethin, 1998, p. 63) that we apply here to an educational path:

(1) The First Noble Truth – *dukkha* is often translated as 'suffering' or perhaps more appropriately – *dis-ease*. This dis-ease may be the equivalent of the prisoners' condition in Plato's cave proposing the need for education. This epistemological condition of ignorance,

---

<sup>2</sup> See Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta (The Discourse That Sets Turning the Wheel of Truth, Samyutta Nikaya 56.11), Maha-parinibbana Sutta (Last Days of the Buddha, Digha Nikaya 16), Mahasaccaka Sutta (The Greater Discourse to Saccaka, Majjhima Nikaya 36)

symbolized by the cave is, however, *created* by our own minds through *uneducated* perception (Gethin, 1998, p. 70). Human dis-ease manifests in our being possessed by a constant dissatisfaction. We are beset by a restlessness of either wanting things that we do not have (e.g., money, house, spouse, tenure), or wishing to disown things that we do (e.g., sickness, job interview, problematic relationship). Even when seemingly satisfied, undergirding satisfaction is the wish to prolong satisfaction hence 'satisfaction' itself holds the seed of dissatisfaction.

(2) The Second truth – *samudaya* (origin/cause) – locates the source of the human problem within the uneducated human mind that suffers from ignorance (*avijja*).<sup>3</sup> The 'educational' responsibility then focuses on liberating the mind from an epistemological error (Olendzki, 2011). Our minds witness the world of appearances (just as the prisoners in the cave), yet with every appearance the mind superimposes its cravings/aversions over perception. As Gethin writes, “craving goes hand in hand with a fundamental ignorance and misapprehension of the nature of the world” (1998, p. 73). Very much like the cave allegory, we confuse appearances with 'things as such'. Acting upon such false perception our morality becomes ignorance-laden. Two interesting aspects of *avijja* help further elaborate the second truth as well as point to parallels and distinctions between Plato and the Buddha:

a) The understanding of *Ignorance*. The etymology of the term *a-vijja* reveals a parallel between Plato and the Buddha that runs as a thread through Buddhism, Yoga and Daoism. *Vijja* connotes with knowledge but *a-vijja* is not lack of knowledge but rather its negation. We are thus not speaking of ignorance as a lacking of knowledge but rather as holding views that are the opposite of *right* knowledge. This aligns clearly with Socrates's preference of unknowing (*aporia*) over the holding of wrong

---

<sup>3</sup> The cause of *dukkha* is associated with ignorance (*avijja*) or with craving (*tanha*). Both are possible entry points within the twelve-fold cycle of dependent origination (Loy, 1988). Here we leaned toward the former given the clearer linkage to the cave allegory.

views. The ideal of knowing in both cases then is the liberation from viewing appearances (*doxa*) as if they are real.

b) Dualism vs. non-dualism. The difference between Plato and the Buddha lies in the relationship between the 'two worlds'. Whereas in Plato's allegory there is an emphasis on the 'world of appearances' *against* a 'world of forms' the flavor one gets within Buddhism, especially in its later Mahayana interpretations, is one that stresses the co-dependence of the knower and the known (a theme that will be stressed in the section discussing Yoga). In a number of interpretations, these 'two worlds' co-exist (Loy, 1988). They are seen as two as long as the *uneducated* mind engages with them (Olendzki, 2011, p. 68). Hence the problem we have is that our uneducated mind engages with the appearances and *creates* the cave. Liberation from 'the cave' is the liberation from the ignorance of our own mind. It is thus far less clear here whether objects have an ontological status without a mind that perceives them.

(3) The third Noble Truth – *nibbana* – is a term that connotes diverse meanings including Truth, cessation of *dukkha*, 'extinguishing of desires' and others (Rahula, 1959). When the 'fire' of our cravings is extinguished, or perhaps seen as an impersonal constant flux that ceases to be that which guides our actions, the cave will cease to exist with it. Perhaps the most important thing to understand here is that the meaning of a realization of the nature of appearances as insubstantial is automatically a realization of the nature of the insubstantiality of the seer of appearances. The 'self' that confuses appearances with things as such, confuses itself as a 'thing as such'. Enlightenment may thus be seen as the realization of the insubstantiality of knower and known, thus contrasting Plato's dualism with a non-dual epistemology.



*Nibbana* constitutes the ideal of 'the educated person' that is reflected in a mind that has recovered from the human *dis-ease* of ignorance. This would be the equivalent of the philosopher's escaping the cave and knowing the 'good'. This points to a clear affinity between the Buddha and Plato that both viewed knowledge and virtue as unified. However, we believe that the Buddha would be more explicit in viewing knowledge as the means and virtue as its educational aim, given his anti-intellectualism manifested in a resistance to engage in metaphysical-philosophical discourse when it was not clearly linked to the liberation from suffering (see Gombrich, 2009).

(4) The Fourth Noble truth – *maggā* (path) – may be likened to the Buddha's curriculum. This curriculum is the eightfold path that culminates in the unification of wisdom and compassion. It is also known as the 'middle path' for it stems from the Buddha's own experience from which he concluded that liberation will be achieved neither by extreme austerity nor by indulgence in sense pleasures (Rahula, 1959, p. 45). Importantly, the emphasis on the human condition as dependent on how we perceive (from the mind *in here*), far more than on that which is perceived (*out there*), proposes a substantial shift in our perspective about education. Education becomes primarily an individual's commitment to the purification of his or her own mind. The metaphorical journey out of the cave is understood as a path of the purification of the mind and its recovery from an epistemological error.

When the mind is transformed so that it awakens from the spell of *avijjā* we are said to embody: Right Understanding, Right thought, Right speech, Right action, Right livelihood, Right effort, Right mindfulness, and Right concentration. This eightfold path is conventionally grouped into ethics (*sīla*), mental discipline (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*pañña*). In Buddhist terms, Plato's 'good' (the sun), is expressed in the unification of wisdom (*pañña*) and compassion (*karuṇā*) that can be seen both as expressions of the purification of the mind,

and as the pedagogical means for realizing this aim. Wisdom and compassion that must reciprocally balance each other (Rahula, 1959, p. 46) are expressed in self-less action, altruism and benevolence. The path that leads from self-centeredness of a mind that confuses things 'as such' with things as the mind *itself* perceives, to a mind that dispels the 'self' around which it had centered, will be inclined to wise and compassionate action. Such action would perhaps manifest in the return of the philosopher to the cave after enlightenment **and transform this solitary act into a deeply ethical and socially-engaged endeavor**. Such indeed, is at least the ethos of Mahayana Buddhism that posed the role model of the *bodhisattva* – one who engages in the Buddhist path, attains enlightenment and dedicates his or her life to the liberation of all sentient beings based on endless compassion. This socially-engaged ethos has become one of the central themes within contemporary Buddhism and within its educational interpretations (Eppert et al, 2015; Hattam, 2004).

Given the contemporary interest in mindfulness practice, we offer some reflections on the place of mindfulness within the Buddhist tradition and comment on the relation of these practices to philosophy of education. As was noted earlier, *Right mindfulness* is the seventh constituent of an eightfold path that spans the full gamut of ethical living. However, the exponential rise in scientific research of the benefits of mindfulness *practice* and its growing incorporation in diverse educational settings (recently depicted in the *Handbook of mindfulness in education* (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016)) has paradoxically led to both a growing awareness to *and* a hiding of, its Buddhist origins (Ergas, 2014). Philosophers of education have been responding to this movement in diverse ways that position Buddhism at the center of contemporary debates. This includes the appeal to Buddhism as a tradition from which to elucidate and rejuvenate educational practice (Eppert et al, 2015; Todd, 2015) as well as a critical response to what has been derogatorily termed the 'McMindfulness' phenomenon (Purser & Loy, 2013) – the extraction of mindfulness from its Buddhist ethos

and hence its transformation into a school 'pathology proofing practice' (O'Donnell, 2015). We believe this field will continue to develop in the coming years.

## **2.2 Hinduism through the case of Classical yoga: absorbed in the cave to seek liberation**

Of the diversity of belief systems that go under the term 'Hinduism' (e.g., advaita Vedanta, Purva Mimamsa, Shaivism) we will focus **only on** Patanjali's classical yoga for two main reasons: a) This tradition will be more familiar to the reader given the pervasiveness of yoga practice in Western industrialized countries as well as its contemporary applications within schools. b) Of all four traditions discussed here, we suspect that classical yoga would be the one closest to the fundamental views presented in Plato's cave allegory.

Our analysis will be based on Patanjali's *yogasutra*, a text containing 196 aphorisms dated arguably to the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. This text, written by a sage named Patanjali of which very little is known, is a compilation of diverse traditions of Patanjali's times. Essentially, like the cave allegory it provides us with a full worldview, along with a path toward an Absolute Truth, broadly understood here as an *educational path*.

### *2.2.1 A dualist worldview*

Most interpreters understand classical yoga as depicting a dualistic ontology-epistemology (Feuerstein, 2001; Iyengar, 1993; Larson, 1987).<sup>4</sup> Such interpretation immediately locates us within the context of Plato's cave allegory. By pointing to the distinctions between these two forms of dualism, we will be able to inform our understanding of both perspectives. The dualism of classical yoga lies between *objective* nature (*Prakriti*), and *subjectivity* - the Seer

---

<sup>4</sup> It is however important to note Whicher (1998) as a critic of such position.

or Self (*Purusha*).<sup>5</sup> Nature, is the phenomenal. It is comprised of basic elements known as the three *gunas* - *tamas*, *rajas* and *sattva*. The three are never in balance hence the phenomenal world is in constant flux in which things are tied in a chain of causality. The Seer, however, is of an entirely different ilk. It is beyond Nature, which means it is unconditioned, eternal, and never changing.

The most important thing to understand here is our own makings in this setting. A human being comprises of both Nature and the Seer. Supposedly, this would align well with Plato's or Descartes's body/mind dualism, yet that is where yoga offers a substantially different position. Thoughts, sensations, emotions, and feelings that are associated conventionally with the mind and the body, all belong to Nature. They are all objects that can be observed and essentially are no different from the desktop or the paper at which you are looking. They are *not* our True identity that is, "...the transcendental Self, Spirit, or pure Awareness, as opposed to the finite personality." (Feuerstein, 2001, p. 458). The 'finite personality' that we experience normally in our day-to-day life is nothing but Nature, which has absolutely nothing to do with the Seer/Self. In fact, the aim of yoga is this very realization.

### *2.2.2 The human condition and its problem*

The 'educational' problem here is mistaking the phenomenal with the Real, a concern that is clearly shared by Patanjali and Socrates. The affinities however, are deeper for in both cases the educational path is grounded in the fact that wrong epistemology-ontology cannot but result in unethical action in the world. In this sense, both Patanjali and Socrates were concerned with correcting our misperception so that moral living will flow from the knowing of Truth. However, given the different views on the kind of dualism involved here, the error is conceptualized differently, and the 'educative' path differs.

---

<sup>5</sup> The translations of *prakriti/purusha* vary (Feuerstein, 2001; Iyengar, 1993)

According to yoga, the layperson travels in the world with the sense that he or she is seeing reality as such (as the prisoners in the cave) yet in effect he or she is looking through a Nature-mind through which all one can see is a Nature phenomenal reality. The mind is trapped in a hall of mirrors that it takes to be Real. Every sense perception seen *out there* invokes a movement *in here* that is owned by a Nature mind that conceives of this experience as ‘my’ experience. Prosaically put, if, for example, someone insults or flatters you, you perceive it based on your Nature-mind, and understand their words as referring to your ‘real’ identity. You then feel the insult and react, or feel the palpitation and rash resulting from that person's flattery, and you react to that. You would think of this as reality as such, yet classical yoga states that it is all simply a phenomenal world governed by causality and change – an endless drama of constant emotional turmoil with no way out.

The problem then, very much like in Buddhism, is human suffering and how it can be overcome. Overcoming suffering in yoga's case will result from disengaging from a false identification with Nature, and dwelling in the Seer. This is the gateway to perceiving the Real, which is nothing like this drama that is created by the interplay of a mind that is part of the world of appearances. What we see here then is a clear affinity between Patanjali's yoga and the educative path of the cave allegory as we understand both to be concerned with a shift from identifying with the phenomenal, changing and tangible world to that of the eternal, unchanging and intangible world. At least conceptually speaking the Real that Patanjali speaks of would seem to resemble the eternal and unchanging world of forms that are outside the Platonic cave. However, this is where the affinity ends as we show by examining the educational path of yoga.

### *2.2.3 The educational yogic path*

In contrast to Plato's allegory, Patanjali would by no means count on philosophizing as an educative path toward escaping the cave. This can be clearly shown by turning to the *yogasutra* itself. 'Yoga', Patanjali (2001) tells us in sutra I.2, 'is the restriction of the fluctuation of consciousness',<sup>6</sup> and in I.3 'then the Seer abides in its essential form'. What are these 'fluctuations of consciousness'? Patanjali elaborates in sutras I.5-11 (p. 218): they include sense impressions, thoughts, ideation, cognition, memory, psychic activity – pretty much all mental activity with which a mortal human being would be familiar (Feuerstein, 2001; Raveh, 2012). **Strangely**, even 'right knowledge' is included here. Patanjali lists it alongside: error, metaphor, deep sleep and memory. Our highest reasoning and logical argumentation – essentially the activity and results of *philosophizing* as we tend to understand it - are still considered by Classical yoga's ontology to be 'fluctuations of consciousness' that belong to Nature. While yoga will clearly distinguish between 'higher' ideation that is the result of *buddhi* (roughly equivalent to Plato's Reason) and a lower mind (*manas*) based on which we engage with the world reflecting our desirous nature, both will remain Nature's manifestations (Feuerstein, 2001 p. 240; Iyengar 1993, p. 35). As such, they are a hindrance to the realization that the yogi seeks. In other words, the escape from the Platonic cave, mythical as it already is, is nothing even remotely close to our highest imagination. The highest realization and ultimate goal of yoga is to stop all mental activity including the most philosophically-rigorous (Raveh, 2012, p. 26). Only by the stopping of such internal motion can the unchanging Absolute truth be revealed, as the Seer is not moved by Nature. The state of such realization is *kaivalya* – 'aloneness' that Muller (1899, p. 309) viewed as *separation* between Seer and seen. While the Sanskrit word for yoga is derived from the verb *yug* translated as *integration*, what the yogi is in fact after, is a separation from Nature, and a full identification with the Seer – an utter content-less awareness.

---

<sup>6</sup> We use Feuerstein's translation. See Patanjali (2001).

What we see here is a complete mistrust of conceptualization and language. It is clear then that some other means must be proposed for our liberation. Indeed, the yogic postures with which many may be familiar emerge as one alternative vehicle for such a path. Yet this familiar aspect of the yogic path is in fact, only *one* limb (*anga*) out of eight that constitute the yogic path (*ashtanga yoga*) that are elaborated in *yogasutra* II.29 (Patanjali 2001, p. 224) and include moral precepts, practices of purification, postures (*asanas*), breath exercises (*pranayama*), disengagement of the senses and three phases of growing concentration within meditation. With the exception of the moral precepts that are associated with the yogi's moral conduct with his own self and with others, these practices constitute an austere regime that the yogi practices on his own or with a Guru. In a most paradoxical twist, at least traditionally, liberation awaits the yogi *not* by climbing outside the cave but rather by deliberately entering the (Himalayan) cave and working directly with the mind that again, like in Buddhism, seems to be responsible for the creation of the cave of misperception.<sup>7</sup>

Patanjali's *yogasutra* points to the uncanny not only in its trajectory of a mystical experience but also in its third part (2001, pp. 226-230) that discusses magical spiritual powers (*siddhis*) that the yogi will gain through practice. Nevertheless, contemporary yoga practice is a pervasive phenomenon and its growing applications in schools as well as the scientific research of this domain are becoming noticeable.<sup>8</sup> We believe that this, like the growing pervasiveness of mindfulness practice, along with concerns of over-commercialization and the transposing of a practice from its origins warrant a serious engagement for philosophers of education. It is specifically here, and perhaps in Daoism that appears next, that we find a fruitful direction for such engagement in exploring what has become the 'trademark' of

---

<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge Daniel Raveh for this idea that he suggested in a personal correspondence.

<sup>8</sup> In this context, it should be noted that the interpretation offered here follows more of a mythical orientation, which highlights the yogi as *retreating* from the world. However, contemporary interpretations have opposed this orientation, stressing the yogi as a socially-engaged being, highlighting the moral precepts as well as postural yoga as *socially-oriented* ethics (Iyengar, 1993; Whicher, 1998)

contemporary yoga practice – postures and their educative role.<sup>9</sup> Contemporary yoga authorities in this domain elaborate how the body can be viewed as a vehicle for education in ethics based on postural practice grounded in yoga texts (Iyengar, 2005). This orientation combined with contemporary accounts of the body (Shusterman, 2008) appears to provide a substantial path toward the further analysis of educational theory and practice as some have begun demonstrate (Helberg, Heyes & Rohel, 2009; Martin & Ergas, 2016).

### **2.3 Daoism: following the way out of the cave**

Daoism presents a particular challenge to the approach taken in this chapter. Unlike Buddhism and Yoga which allow for relatively systematic discussions and can to some extent be rendered in educational terms while also being read with and against the cave allegory, Daoism resists such systematization. Of all four traditions discussed here, it is perhaps the most distant from Plato's cave, and hence from the world of a 'Western' reader. We will nevertheless attempt to provide some kind of a coherent picture, within a worldview that thrives on paradox.

#### *2.3.1 The human condition*

The human condition for Daoism is simply one of unity with the Dao, the 'way' of nature. The Dao, way, or path, could be understood as a way out of the cave into the light of real understanding. The Daoist sage would then be the wise figure who assists the student in finding the way out the cave, of distinguishing truth from error, with truth being understood as following the way, and error being a willful departure from it. However, this dualistic interpretation which suggests a division between the real and the illusory (or right and wrong

---

<sup>9</sup> Of the 196 versus of Patanjali's yogasutra only two focus on this aspect. This is hence a development of later texts.



paths) is somewhat foreign to the Daoist way. This is partly because the Dao refers not just to the way or path but also to the ultimate source of all. It is the source of both the darkness and the light, the yin and yang as classical Chinese cosmology sees it. In a certain sense, Dao contains all, and departure from it is illusory. So, if departure from the true way is illusory then the dualism between appearances and realities in Plato's allegory is also, in a sense, insubstantial. The achievement of Dao is, paradoxically, through non-achievement or non-action, through simplicity, spontaneity and unity with the Dao. This unity resists ideas of becoming, growing, or developing, images that education often assumes. To come to a clear conceptual grasp of all of this might be to miss the point since, as the first line of Daoism's central text, the *Daodejing* states, "The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao."<sup>10</sup>

### 2.3.2 *The way of learning*

It is common to contrast Daoism's lack of explicit moral precepts with the Confucian emphasis on virtue, ritual and social order. However, this might be a rather too philosophical interpretation to Daoism. Some have argued that morality plays a more important role within Daoism than typical readings of the *Daodejing* would suggest (Palmer 1991, p. 11). Other texts, such as the *T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien* (The Writings of the Exalted One on Response and Retribution), extols the Daoist to the right path, and speaks of the dangers of proceeding on an evil path. But on the whole, Daoism seems to be more concerned to deconstruct the idea of ethical systems implicit within philosophical paths and images of Platonic ascent. So, although Dao can be seen as playing a role similar to *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) in ancient Greek thinking (Yu 2007) – as a regulative ideal – it can also be read as primarily descriptive, not requiring conformity to a particular path or set of virtues, indicating that the path is inscribed in the activities of the world (both human and non-human). Particularly within the writings of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, we find a non-dualist recognition that, just

---

<sup>10</sup> The Feng and English translation is here used. See Lao Tzu (2011).

as water flows downwards, so all of nature, including human beings, follow the rhythms of the Dao.

The idea that the ethical way is a natural expression of the Dao might seem to negate the need for becoming, or indeed for learning. In one sense, attending to the Dao is the principle mode of learning, even though sages can assist with the sensitivity and attention required for that learning. Ignorance, from the Daoist perspective, is more of a resistance or insensitivity to the Dao. But in fact, Daoists engage in a more subversive and playful logic in order to break open common ideas about progress, development, knowledge and learning. Our expectations are challenged in order to reveal the rationalist framings that encumber human thought and action. Thus ideas of progress and advancement (through learning or otherwise) have always struck a discordant note within Daoism. In contrast to Confucian ideas where learning is more an acquisitive and positive process, Daoist learning entails an emptying or even ‘unlearning’, an idea that resonates with Socrates practices of *aporia*. As chapter 48 of the *Daodejing*, states,

In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.

In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.

Less and less is done

Until non-action is achieved.

When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.

The world is ruled by letting things take their course.

It cannot be ruled by interfering.

This image of emptying, or doing nothing, is reminiscent of Socratic ignorance, which could be interpreted as liberation from a kind of false image of a self who is able to acquire knowledge. Learning is not a process of accumulation because the Dao resists reification into representational or conceptual knowledge. The practice that Daoism advocates is known as *wu-wei*, non-action. This is not simply passivity, but rather letting Dao regulate activity. Thus, the emptiness of *wu-wei* entails harmony with the Dao. This realization of learning seems to anticipate concerns about the dependencies and deficits implied in ideas about learning and teaching. The acquisition of knowledge through a planned educational process is an impediment to the Dao and so the image of ascent out of the cave towards a particular conception of knowing could be misleading. Daoist knowledge (*zhi*) is more akin to mastering, a mastering that – in typical Daoist rhetoric – must be achieved without mastering. This means that the world is not an object to be mastered by a knowledgeable subject, but that mastery is achieved through letting the Dao into itself through non-action (Moeller 2004, 112). Practising *wu wei*, the Daoist submits to the Dao, thereby achieving mastery without mastery. Becoming less, Daoist learning is as much unlearning.

### 2.3.3 Daoism as non-dual

Within the unity of the Dao, there are tensions and changes, expressed in the cyclical movement of the Yin/Yang which, although perceived as an irreconcilable duality (i.e. a world of appearances), appears ultimately as complementary and interdependent: hence ontologically non-dual. Consequently, although it is possible not to be aligned with the flow of the Dao, ethical concepts such as failure, wrongdoing, or lack of resolution seem out of place. No wonder, then, that Daoism, like Confucianism, is sometimes said to be quietist or fatalist in orientation. Since it emphasizes a kind of naturalism, Daoism has an intrinsic suspicion of human rationality which reflects the performative conception of language it assumes. Feng Youlan, of the ‘New Daoist’ school claims a trans-rationality for Daoism

(rather than irrational or a-rational) aligning mystical ideas of negativity that transcend the categories of conceptual reasoning (and has therefore been compared with Wittgenstein and Heidegger) (Moeller 2004, 22-24). More than anything, overthinking marks humanity's separation from nature, a separation that paradoxically is insubstantial, even unreal. Learning to live with and *as* nature is, then, centrally Daoist, a learning to become nothing. But the non-dualist tension with dualism recurs since, in a sense, we can do no other than be who we are. Human action, whether gentle or violent, rational or trans-rational expresses itself as part of the Dao. If Plato's image of the ascent out of the cave to become fully human is interpreted as a progressive ascent from ignorance to knowledge, it seems at odds with the non-dual acknowledgement that everything is already part of the Dao. Conventional readings of the allegory presuppose the very idea of separation that Daoists would not recognize. By contrast, then, for Daoists the cave might be seen as a suitable dwelling place. This might accord well with other philosophies of education that resist a developmental or progressive view of childhood, as the preparation for adulthood, where childhood and adulthood are simply phases of a flow, rather than hierarchically organized. Still, Daoism calls for a sensitivity to the world and the rhythms that guide it.

Although Daoism tends to avoid extremism, legends of ingesting precious substances such as jade, cinnabar, and gold, in the pursuit of longevity might seem at odds with the naturalism of the Dao. Within the history of Daoism, the Daoist quest for immortality has sometimes been understood as a more literal pursuit than Buddhist liberation or Hindu Moksha, revealing the apparently inescapable need to define human existence in terms of a lack. Here Plato's ascent imagery is more clearly relevant, where immortality is the unchanging world. The Dao can be followed through meditative and physical practices, which are often intermixed. The traditional lineages of Daoist practitioners suggest an important aspect of Eastern pedagogy not much discussed: the relative importance of oral and direct transmission in contrast to the

reliance of the written word in the West. Space prevents fuller discussion here of that vital aspect of Eastern pedagogy, though drawing attention to the efforts of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to destroy that history by cutting that direct link to the lineages of great Daoist masters should encourage us to pay attention to the important recovery of Daoism (and even more of Confucianism) within China today. Across the world, the Daoist traditions and pedagogies are conveyed through the practices of Tai Chi Chuan, Chi Gung and other related practices, many of which seem to fuse the development of *wu wei* with practices of longevity. The challenge for the future may be to ensure the popularized ‘new age’ or ‘perennialist’ Western appropriations of Daoist ideas which tend to reduce Daoism to universal system of self-help and cultivation, are able to reconnect with the more established and ancient traditions. Daoist ideas around cultivation of virtue should be given more attention by educationalists (Culham 2015).

## **2.4 Confucius: the superior path from the cave**

### *2.4.1 The human condition*

Taking pleasure in learning is a principle assumption of Confucius’ most well-known text, the Analects (Confucius 1893, 1: 1). It seems to be a natural aspect of human nature to take pleasure in the cultivation of the self by being respectful to others, particularly elders (Confucius 1893, 14: 42). This is one reason why Confucianism is often characterized as hierarchical and authoritarian, entailing the attenuation of critical thinking in favor of deference. Education might then be less as an emergence from the cave than being contained by it, or even dragged into it. Following the 1978 reforms in China, Western educators are reported to have found Chinese teaching and learning practices that “contrasted markedly with current Western practice, though not necessarily with much earlier Western practice.

These included teacher-centered whole class teaching, very large classes, apparent passivity on the part of learners with low levels of active learner participation, and much use of teacher-led chanting, rote-learning and mimetic methods” (Starr 2012, 4). Images of mass education anywhere in the world lend Plato’s allegory a figurative realism that is striking. However, recent changes in Chinese social, cultural and economic circumstances suggest these characterizations to be at best outdated, though more likely neo-colonial impositions and misrepresentations. Several scholars of Chinese thought and Confucianism have recently argued that these perceptions distort our understanding of both ancient and modern pedagogical approaches in China and that Confucian thought is not by any means antithetical to critical inquiry (Tan 2013; Kim 2003; Starr 2012). It is no surprise, then, that scholars have found similarities between the political and social interests of philosophers such as Dewey and Plato to resonate with Confucian theory, encouraging a revision and revival of interest in it (Sim 2009; Tan 2016).

The similarities between Confucius (551 to 479 BCE) and Socrates (470 to 399 BCE) are particularly notable. Both lived at similar times and despite neither writing anything down, they had enormous influence on Eastern and Western philosophical traditions respectively. Understanding the need for rights to balance with social obligations is a common theme between Plato and Confucius (Dionisio 2014, 42). For Confucius, it is for the purpose of service to the state, in harmony with the individual, that education primarily exists. This order is expressed both through the harmony of the cosmos and those within it, again suggesting a correlation between the concerns of ancient Greek and Chinese philosophers (Wolf 1999).

#### *2.4.2 Confucian education*

The primary educational goal of Confucian education and central to the general philosophy is the development of *Junzi*, which has been translated as ‘gentlemen’, ‘superior person’, or the

ethically well-cultivated person. Clearly the image of escape from Plato's cave can be associated with realization of *Junzi* which can be regarded as the goal of Confucian life. In the Han Dynasty (206 BCE to 220 CE), five principles of virtue were established on the basis of Confucian thought which have been influential: humaneness or benevolence (*ren*), righteousness or justice (*yi*), wisdom or knowledge (*zhi*), integrity or honesty (*Xin*), and ceremony or proper rite (*li*). This list might not look so out of place in an Aristotelian context. But a central component of virtue that will seem rather foreign to modern readers is that of 'proper rite', *li*. Approaching the world with appropriate sensitivity to rite, ceremony, or propriety might seem related to convention or custom rather than a question of morality, since "it is by the Rules of Propriety that the character is established" (Analects 8: 8). One explanation for this concern for rite could be the expectation that education should primarily serve to develop an elite rank of officials and civil servants in order to administer a large and enduring empire, a concern that correlates with Plato's description of the guardian class in *The Republic*. It could be argued that Confucius' concern for rite performs a social and civil function making administration in those circumstances more effective. But to regard rite as only a historical contingency would miss the deeper links between humanism, harmony, and hierarchy which define the core of Confucian thought (Storr 2012, 8). There is ongoing debate about whether rite (*li*) stands in an instrumental relation to the core virtue of humaneness (*Ren*) (Li 2007), but even if *Ren* is the principle virtue, the order and respect of *li* is not incidental. Performance of rites with the appropriate level of respect is suggestive of a virtue in and of itself. In relation to this propriety, traditional Chinese culture regards the elders, parents or rulers with particular deference, strikingly illustrated by the concept of teaching itself.

The Chinese character 教 *jiao*, which means to teach, is composed of 孝 *xiao* 'filial piety' plus the causative element 文. In other words, to teach can be literally understood as being 'to

cause someone to be filially pious' (Storr 2012, 8). Thus, *Junzi* requires a virtue that Western educational theorists tend to avoid: filial piety. Little wonder, then, that Chinese education systems are sometimes characterized as less concerned with critical thinking and as lacking in egalitarian principles. While there are examples of educated women in Confucian history, for example Ban Zhao (45-115 CE) (Berthrong & Berthrong 2000, 70), in general the conceptions of authority, piety and deference appear to have encouraged traditional roles for men and women within a larger social hierarchy (Galtung and Stenslie 2014, chapter 37). Of course these issues are not unique to Confucianism. It is also worth keeping in mind that filial piety extends to the state as a whole, which, in this context seems to include everything that is beneath heaven. In other words, the virtues of the family are also virtues of the state, and of the cosmos itself.

Considering again Plato's cave, this account of Confucian moral education may strike one as remaining in the cave rather than stepping into the light of truth. But, of course, this very much depends upon one's conception of the allegory. The development of *Junzi* through *Li*, *Ren* and the other virtues can certainly be framed in terms of the ascent of the individual out of the cave, and despite the misgivings about the patriarchy and deference, play a role in establishing the proper ordering of things such that truth can prevail. While Confucians may be less concerned with metaphysical and ontological questions of truth vs. appearance, the ethical and spiritual ordering of the cosmos through the development of virtues can at least suggest some important connections between a Confucian and a Platonic cosmology.

## PART 3

### **3. Towards an 'Eastern' philosophy of education?**



Reading with and against Plato to examine Eastern philosophy of education has revealed certain interesting tensions between: knowledge and ignorance; subjective and objective; nature and culture; dualism and non-dualism. Put simply, we have explored whether the cave is suggestive of a state of illusion or ignorance and whether what is at stake is both epistemological and ontological. One wonders whether analytical distinctions between knowing and being can be upheld, or whether the compression into non-dualism makes the distinction untenable.

To be human is to know. The prisoners cannot resist knowing, but their knowledge is of shadows framed by unknowing or ignorance. To understand our own ignorance is an important insight that cuts across Plato and these four traditions. Differences between the cave allegory and the diverse traditions are in many cases reflected in the substantiality of knower and its/his/her conceptualization.

Knowing is being, an idea that is most evident in questions around understanding the good life. Knowledge of virtue can only be practiced, having little or no substantial reality in a purely intellectual realm. In this sense, we detect a less intellectualist approach within the traditions reviewed in comparison to Plato. That is, most notably in Daoism and in Buddhism as well, there is a preference for the one who acts virtuously even if he or she would not be able to justify their virtue based on philosophical argumentation. This clearly points to a perspective that is characteristic of these traditions that are more suspicious as to the relation between language and world (a theme that had taken center stage only in later developments in Western philosophy). This is most famously captured in Eastern aphorisms such as: “When the wise man points at the Moon, the idiot looks at the finger” as well as “Those who know do not speak”.

It is thus clear that an educational path that follows in the footsteps of these traditions will rely on a curricular-pedagogical approach that addresses the human mind based on means that are other than conceptualization and in fact attempt to ameliorate, reduce or even stop this tendency at least for certain periods of time. Meditation, yogic postures, tai chi, compassion meditation and other contemplative practices, **engaged in solitude or in communion**, can be viewed as pedagogies that follow this orientation. They seek to detach the practitioner from identifying necessarily with a reason-based substantial knower characteristic of Plato-Descartes-Kant and appeal to a body-heart-mind as an insubstantial process of knowing. They bring into view the possibility of direct pedagogy, sometimes wordless, sometimes unwritten, and often at the fringes of language. Although 20th century phenomenology draws us somewhat closer to this kind of engagement with philosophy of education (Lewin 2015), nevertheless a leap may still remain as those working from the position of Eastern traditions are required to mobilize the uncanniness of a post or pre-discursive meditative experience to the world of philosophical argumentation.

Overall, we find that the four traditions reviewed very briefly in this chapter open an incredibly rich and nuanced terrain for the future of philosophy of education. This applies to the analysis of the curricular-pedagogical approaches that are proposed by them as well as to the substantially different premises from which these traditions engage in the understanding of human existence and its aims. The current contemplative turn in education and the emergence of a 'post-secular age' may be signs that this orientation will prove both fruitful and necessary for the further development of the field (Ergas, 2017; Lewin 2016).

## **References**

Berthrong, J. & Berthrong, E. (2000) *Confucianism: A Short Introduction*, Oneworld Publications.

Confucius (1893) *The Analects*, Translated by James Legge Available at: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/c/confucius/c748a/index.html>. Accessed 23rd February 2017.

Culham, T. (2015) 'Reuniting Virtue and Knowledge' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49:2, 294-310.

Dionisio G. (2014) 'Natural Law Tradition and Confucian Culture: Beyond East West Divide' *College of Arts and Sciences Review* 9 (1), 42-62.

Ergas, O. (2017). *Reconstructing 'education' through mindful attention*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ergas O. (2014). Mindfulness in education at the intersection of science, religion, and healing. *Critical Studies in Education*, 55(1), 58-72.

Ergas, O. & Todd, S (eds.) (2016) *Philosophy East/West: Exploring Intersections between Educational and Contemplative Practices*. London: Wiley-Blackwell.

Eppert, C., Vokey, D. Nguyen T.T.A., Bai, H, (2015). Intercultural philosophy and the nondual wisdom of 'basic goodness': Implications for contemplative and transformative education, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 49 (2), 274-293.

Eppert C., & Wang H. et-al (2008) *Cross-cultural studies in curriculum: Eastern thought, educational insights* New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Feuerstein, G. (2001). *The Yoga Tradition*. Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press.

Galtung, M. and Stenslie, S., (2014). *49 Myths about China*, London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Gethin, R., (1998). *The Foundations of Buddhism*. London: Oxford Univ. Press.

Gyatso, T. (2000). *Ancient wisdom modern world. Ethics for the new millennium*. London: Abacus.

Hattam, R., (2004). *Awakening struggle – Towards a Buddhist critical social theory*. Flaxton: Post Pressed.

Helberg N., Heyes, C.S., Rohel, J. (2009). Thinking through the body: Yoga, philosophy, and physical education. *Teaching Philosophy*, 32(3), 263-284.

Gombrich, R. (2009). *What the Buddha thought*. London: Equinox.

Hyland, T., (2014). Buddhist practice and the educational endeavor: in search of a secular spirituality for state-funded education in England. *Ethics and Education*, 8 (3), 241-252.

Iyengar, B. K. S. (1993). *Light on the yoga sutras of Patanjali*. London: Thornsons.

Kim, H. (2003) Critical Thinking, Learning and Confucius: A Positive Assessment, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, (37) 1, 71-87.

Lao Tzu, (2011) *Tao te Ching*, Translated by Gia-fu Feng and Jane English. New York: Random House.

Larson, G. and Bhattacharya R. S. (Eds.) (1987). *Samkhya: A Dualist Tradition in Indian Philosophy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Lewin, D. (2015) 'Heidegger East and West: Philosophy as Educative Contemplation' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49 (2), 221-239.

Lewin, D. (2016) *Educational Philosophy for a Post-secular Age*. London: Routledge.

Li, C. (2007) 'Li as Cultural Grammar: On the Relation between Li and Ren in Confucius' "Analects" *Philosophy East and West*, 57 (3), 311-329.

Loy, D. ([1988] 1999). *Nonduality*. New York: Humanity Books.

O'Donnell, A. (2015). Contemplative pedagogy and mindfulness: Developing creative attention in an age of distraction, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49 (2), 187-202.

Olendzki, A. (2011): The construction of mindfulness, *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12 (1), 55-70.

Martin C. & Ergas, O. (2016). Mindfulness, sport and the body: The justification for physical education revisited. *Sports, Ethics and Philosophy*, 10 (2), 161-174.

- Moeller, H-G., (2004) *Daoism Explained: From the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory*. Illinois: Carus Publishing.
- Muller, M. F. (1899). *The Six Systems of Indian Philosophy*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Palmer, M. (1991) *The Elements of Taoism*, Element Books.
- Patanjali, *The Yogasutras*, translated in Feuerstein, G. (2001). *The Yoga Tradition*. Prescott, Arizona: Hohm Press.
- Plato, (2012) *The Republic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, Anchor Books.
- Rahula, W. (1959). *What the Buddha Taught*. New York: Gross Press Grove.
- Raveh, D. (2012). *Exploring the Yogastura: Translation and philosophy*. London: Continuum.
- Schonert-Reichl, K., & Roeser, R. (2016). *Handbook of Mindfulness in Education*. New York: Springer.
- Sim, M. (2009) 'Dewey and Confucius: On Moral Education' *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36 (1), 85–105.
- Shusterman, R. (2008). *Body Consciousness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Starr, D. (2012). China and the Confucian Education Model. *Universitas 21*, Available at: <http://www.universitas21.com/article/educational/details/145/position-paper-on-the-confucian-education-system>. Accessed 23rd February 2017.
- Tan, C. & Wong, B. (2008). Classical traditions of education: Socrates and Confucius, in Tan, C. (ed.), *Philosophical Reflections for Educators*. Singapore: Cengage Learning.
- Tan, C. (2013) *Confucius*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Tan, C. (2016) Beyond 'either-or' thinking: John Dewey and Confucius on subject matter and the learner *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 24 (1), 55-74.

Thurman, R. A. F. (2006). *Meditation and Education: India, Tibet, and Modern America* *Teachers College Record* (108) 9, 1765–1774.

Todd, S. (2015). Experiencing Change, Encountering the Unknown: An Education in ‘Negative Capability’ in Light of Buddhism and Levinas, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 49 (2), 240-254.

Turner, D. (1995). *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wallace, A. B. (1999). ‘The Buddhist tradition of Samatha: Methods of refining and examining consciousness.’ *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 6 (2-3), 175-187.

Whicher, I. (1998). *The Integrity of the Yoga Darsana: A Reconsideration of Classical Yoga*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Williams, P. (1989). *Mahayana Buddhism*. London: Routledge.

Wolf, K. (1999) *Personalities and Problems: Interpretive Essays in World History: Vol 1*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Yu, J. (2007) *The Ethics of Confucius and Aristotle: Mirrors of Virtue*. New York: Routledge.