Eastern and Western philosophy

by Bart Nooteboom

128. Eastern and Western philosophy   published 12-1-2014

Here I start a series on differences and similarities between Eastern and Western philosophy, and my position in that.

There is still a widespread inclination to think that there is an unbridgeable chasm between Eastern and Western philosophy. And a Western bias still is that the East can learn from the West, rather than vice versa, and indeed is doing so, as is exhibited in the spread of technology, capitalism and democracy.

As a side comment, let me add that one can speak of such spread only when allowing for a variety of capitalisms and 'democracies'. A number of self-proclaimed democracies are in fact vehicles for authoritarian rule (Russia, Turkey, Singapore, Malasia). However, Western smugness concerning the greater purity and merit of democracy in the West is partly the result of blindness to its own limitations. Capitalist market ideology is corrupting culture and institutions and removes control over the forces of globalized markets from the populace. The European Union is shaping a huge democratic deficit.

Prior to the Enlightenment, Western philosophy was indeed different from Eastern philosophy on a number of fundamental points. However, particularly in the 18th century there was a large and widespread effect from Eastern on Western philosophy and culture. In philosophy there were effects on the thought of Malebranche, Leibnitz, Voltaire, Hume, Herder, Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Jung and Heidegger. In some cases the effect was superficial (as in the Romantic philosophy following Herder, and in Nietzsche) or Eastern philosophy was used only to highlight or support one's own ideas (Voltaire, Hegel, and again Nietzsche). In some cases, however, the effect was fundamental (Leibnitz, Hume, Schopenhauer, Jung).

On a number of points my philosophy, as expounded in this blog, is more congenial with Eastern than with Western philosophy and on those points some of the Western philosophers that have inspired me are among those who were influenced by the East (e.g. David Hume and Heidegger).

Perhaps the most important and fundamental point concerns the pervasive role of change and variety, in denial of traditional notions from Western philosophy such as *substance*, absolute (unchanging) *universals*, *God*, and a unitary, stable *self* (individual identity).

Related to this, with much Eastern philosophy, and with Heidegger and American pragmatist philosophy, I share the idea of a unity between thinking and action: ideas develop as they are put in action.

In combination, this has brought me to *pragmatism*, the *volatile self*, the role of *the other*, and the notion of *imperfection on the move*. The underlying intuitions and ideas have developed in my career as an innovation scholar. They also loom large in Eastern philosophy.

With notable exceptions (e.g. Heraclitus), in early Western philosophy a static view of reality was taken, with *substance* as the carrier of properties and the basis for identity of the self. In a Platonic tradition, concepts were seen to entail *universals*, applying always and for ever.

Buddhism, by contrast, recognized no substance and saw reality not in terms of things but in terms of processes and impermanence. Buddhism is not concerned with a flight into the safety and stability of a metaphysical being, but faces the fragility and perishability of the human being, and of being in one's body. It did not believe in a transcendent being as creator of the world. An advantage of that is that the problem of evil, the justice of God, in creating evil or allowing it to exist, disappears. Buddhism is not concerned with explaining sorrow but in overcoming it. Life is imperfection on the move. In Buddhist *Nirwana* there is peace, absorption in a state of non-becoming. However, it is not some place or heaven beyond life, but is to be achieved in this life. As such its transcendence is *immanent*, as I have also argued for.

Hindu (Vedic) philosophy did entertain notions of an ultimate, transcendent, encompassing, indifferent identity or being, but is was hardly a God in any usual Western sense, and it was held to be ineffable, not accessible to human categories of thought and language. As such it was more akin to mystical Western traditions.

I will develop these and other themes in the following items of this series.

The main sources that I use in this series are the following

- Cheng, Chung-Ying & Nicholas Brunnin (eds), 2002, *Contemporary Chinese philosophy*, Oxford: Blackwell
- Coplestone, Frederick F., *A history of philosophy,*
- Elders, Fons (ed.), 2000, *Humanism and Buddhism* (in Dutch), Brussels: VUB press.
- Mcfie, Alexander Lyon (ed.), 2003, *Eastern influences on Western philosophy,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Muller. John M. (ed.), 1963, *Oriental philosophies*, London: Macmillan.

129. What to make of East and West?   published 19-1-2014

Where to stand, in the comparison of Western and Eastern philosophy outlined in the preceding item?

First, as in Buddhism, I do not acknowledge any metaphysical absolute substance or being, beyond reality, in the form of a God or in any other form, since if it exists, then almost by definition we could not say anything about it (see item 14 of this blog). In other words, I am an agnostic. I might accept Spinoza's view of a God that is identical to the system of nature, which may be close to the view of Taoism. However, that would not be God in any customary sense, as a personal and providential God with designs for the world and for Man, and I think it makes for more clarity not to call the system of nature God.

Second, the notion of substance leads to the notion of absolute universals that I have argued against (items 16 and 17), as Buddhism does. In both knowledge and ethics, I argued for universals that are provisional and temporary, allowing for individuals that escape from the universal and contribute to its shift or transformation. This connects with my *cycle of*

discovery (item 13). I was astonished to find out that this seems similar to a certain interpretation of *Yin and Yang* in Taoist philosophy. I will return to this in a later item.

Related to this, with much Eastern philosophy, and Western pragmatism and Heidegger, I share the idea of the unity of thinking and being in the world: ideas develop as they are put in action.

Third, following Hume, and in agreement with much Eastern philosophy, I take a non-substantial view of the self. However, against Hume and Buddhism, I argue in my blog (item 8) that while indeed the self is neither unitary nor fixed, there still is a meaningful identity and continuity of the self, in a bodily coherence of neural activity. Without any identity for the self, how could we still talk of agency, intentions, learning, discovery, etc.? I will return to that issue also, in a later item.

Fourth, I agree with Eastern philosophy, and with Montaigne, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, that language is misleading. In my blog, in the items on language and meaning, I discussed what I called the 'object bias' in our thought and language (item 29). That corresponds with the misleading lure of the notion of substance. We conceptualise abstract things (peace, happiness, meaning, power, identity, …) in terms of objects in time and space. I will not return to that issue.

Fifth, as I discussed in item 122, in both Western and Eastern philosophy there is a tendency to reserve enlightenment for an elite of the initiated, the illuminated, the trained, the ascetic, in gaining access to a transcendent, elevated, absolute, supreme being (God, Brahman) or to an enlightened existence in the world (Nirvana). If we renounce absolutes and embrace *imperfection on the move*, we can achieve freedom from self-obsession in ordinary life, in horizontal, immanent transcendence.

Sixth, inspired by Aristotle, and in line with Taoist thought, I seek a middle between extremes of: internal and external, self and other, subject and object, universal and individual, stability and change, exit and voice, trust and control. I seek to do this by analysing the dynamic interplay between the two.

However, I cannot make sense of Taoist rejection of causality in favour of *parallel occurrence* (what Jung called *synchronicity*). I hold on to causality, albeit in its form of Aristotelian multiple causality (see item 96).

130. Confucius   published 27-1-2014

As described by Karen Armstrong in *The great transformation*, philosophy in India and China was very early, in the 9th to 6th century BC, to turn inside the self in ethical reflection, renouncing violence, war, and excessive material acquisition. In India in one stream this turn took the form of lifting the self (*atman*) above or outside itself, to be absorbed into the higher all or one (*brahman*), or in *kenosis,* an emptying of the self to become receptive to a higher will or force. In another stream the aim was not to surrender personal identity but the find the true, higher self.

In the 5th century BC some sages and their followers became oriented towards extremes of compassion and altruism, extended not just to humans but also to animals and even plants, so

that life was barely livable, for not stepping on an insect or a fresh blade of grass. They invented the *Golden Rule* of not doing unto others what one would not want to be done unto oneself.

In Chinese philosophy Confucius raised altruism and orientation to the other human being as a central tenet, and adopted the golden rule. Prior to Confucius (born 551 BC) there were 200 years of strife and war. Confucius strove for peace, justice and tolerance. Confucianism is humanistic, in seeking goodness and happiness not in nature nor beyond nature but in humanity itself. It also was pragmatist, in a unity of thought and action.

Confucian ideals were brought more 'down to earth', made more concrete and practical, more utility-based and oriented at welfare, in *Mohism,* with external sanctions and incentives added to the intrinsic values of Confucianism.

What attracts me in Confucianism is its orientation towards the other, and the idea that thought and action interact, which is akin to the pragmatism that I employ. That stands in contrast to the more self-oriented and passive stance of Buddhism, and to the reach towards a higher order in nature, beyond humanity and society, in Taoism.

What I dislike in Confucianism is its excessive subservience to authority and its obsessive formal adherence to details of ritual and ceremony. From Karen Armstrong I learn that ceremony has the crucial value of creating a communal ethical sense in the public celebration of spirituality. She compared it to the public feasts and performances of tragedy among the ancient Greeks, for sharing *catharsis,* purification of the soul. I can see the value of that but remain suspicious of rigid ritual.

A central value in Confucianism is *filial piety.* To this I object, claiming that the upheavals and rebellion of puberty have value in the preparation of children to break away and assume their own life and convictions. Education should in my view not be the mere transfer and indoctrination of established thought and morality. Literally[1] 'education' means 'leading outside'. While in religious circles that is interpreted as a leading out of darkness into the light of faith, I prefer to interpret it as helping the young to break out and think their own ideas.

If we see Nietzsche as dynamics without altruism, we might see Confucius as altruism without dynamism, while what I advocate is dynamism with altruism. In Confucianism the proper attitude to life is to remain calm in joy and sorrow. There appears to be a lack of Dionysus.

But perhaps while preserving the pragmatic interaction between thought and action, and the orientation towards the other, confucianism can be developed into a more dynamic view. Some of that occurred in later Chinese thought, as I will discuss in the following item.

131. Neo-Confucianism   published 3-2-2014

In the Han dynasty, from about 200 BC, Confucianism was adopted as the national philosophy of China, which yielded a strong bureaucratic system. However, in time Confucianism became ossified, and rival views from Taoism and (from around 800 AD)

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[1] As noted by Joseph Nalin Swaris.

Buddhism gathered influence. In contrast with the moral and regulatory force of Confucianism, Taoism was against extensive institutional regulation and preferred room for natural impulse. While Confucianism focused on practical things, Taoism better satisfied the urge for an underlying metaphysics.

Confucianism was oriented towards order, rules, ritual, social responsibility, and filial piety. That is in danger of stifling innovation and yielding formalism and stagnation, blocking the creativity of deviance . Or is this view of mine the typical Western bias towards individualism? In this blog I have argued the importance of collaboration and trust and the empathy needed for it. I am seeking a middle path between self and other, and between stability and change.

From the 11th century AD *neo-Confucianism* tried to develop a new synthesis, with a re-absorption of Confucianism. This was inspired, in part, by the fear that Taoist metaphysical speculation would go overboard at the expense of practical things, and 'the negative attitude of the Buddhists toward life in the world and their preference for retreating from active social life … would undermine the ancient forms of Chinese social organization' (quoted from John M. Koller's survey of *Oriental philosophies,* 2nd edition p. 306).

There is a need to reconcile opposites of stability and change, order and disorder, self and other, good and evil, and that is what Taoism, in particular, aims to establish.

However, one source of tension is that while Buddhism and Confucianism are non-religious and non-metaphysical, Taoism proposes Tao as a metaphysical entity, the source of both being and non-being, a fundamental principle and source, without characteristics, which cannot be named, and which functions through the world and is indistinguishable from it. This resembles Spinoza's notion of God.

A source of tension between Confucianism and Taoism is that in contrast with Confucianism Taoism is non-interventionist. From its metaphysical view of the harmony and perfection of nature it wants to let things work out for their perfection naturally, left to themselves. This led to a split in neo-Confucianism between interventionists and non-interventionists that reminds us of the split, in the West, between socialists and libertarians.

A similarity between Taoism and Buddhism is that the sage transcends the world of ordinary experience and cognition. In relinquishing the mind of its own the sage is at peace and one with the world. This reinforces non-interventionism.

In view of these complementarities and tensions, it is not surprising that neo-Confucianism has a variety of forms.

However, a deep commonality of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism seems to be a sense of underlying unity, of the spiritual and the material, of substance and change, of thought and action, of knowledge and morality, of self and other.

I wonder how robust that is under incorporation of Western philosophy, as occurred later, in *new Confucianism.*

Where do I stand in all this? I am trying to reconcile the oppositions between subject and object, self and other, order and disorder, and trust and control, without metaphysics, by

analysing the logic of the dynamics between them. Here, I run into a fascinating possibility of a parallel with the Taoist principles of Yin and Yang, which I will discuss later.

132. Religion and pragmatism   published 10-2-2014

Almost everywhere and always, people have sought religion, in a flight from existential anxiety, pain, suffering, vicissitudes and uncertainties of earthly life, into something transcendent. But that was not always God.

In her *The great transformation* Karen Armstrong analyses the emergence of spirituality and religion in different regions of antiquity, in East and West. She focuses on the *Axial Age*, from 900 to 300 BC, so called because it was a pivotal time, an axis around which development of spirituality and religion turned.

From that book I draw the key notion of *kenosis*: emptying the self of egotism, greed, and violence, and practice of the spirituality of compassion. All religions have exhibited that, and they all arrived, independently, at the Golden Rule: Do (not do) onto others what you (do not) want done upon yourself.

One difference is the following. In Christianity and Islam the idea developed that one should begin with belief in God and a doctrine on his being and the divine order, in order to subsequently apply that to spirituality and ethics. In the East, in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism, the idea was the reverse: that practice comes before theory; that disciplined sympathy would itself yield intimations of transcendence. That implements the pragmatism that I have pleaded for in this blog.

I don't know whether Eastern philosophy has influenced pragmatist philosophers, but the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey did influence developments in neo-Confucianism. Perhaps what pragmatism added was a commitment to active experimentalism, testing ideas for failure.

A second difference, related to the previous one, is that theology, with a written doctrine, in Bible and Koran, was pervasive in the West while in the East it was stringently avoided. Hinduism and Taoism did have an idea of a supreme being or principle (Brahman, Tao) that is the source of all good and bad, is the 'all' and 'one'. But here there is much more evidence of the view that the 'higher' is ineffable, cannot fit into our limited human categories, and is best met with silence. That was part of early Christianity and Islam but was later inexorably replaced by doctrine and orthodoxy, and what was left was relegated to pockets of mysticism. I also have made that plea for recognition of the ineffability of the higher in my blog.

Whether or not there is a sense of a higher being or principle, in Eastern philosophy there is a pervasive sense of impermanence, movement, production and reproduction, of change and transformation, and of variety and particularity, in contrast with the Western orientation towards permanent substance and universals, beyond particular individuals. The world and existence are diverse and in flux, in ongoing production, reproduction and transformation. One can rise above it in spirit, on the basis of disciplined contemplation and kenosis, achieving a sense of being at one with the universe, but it mostly remains being in the world.

133. Substance and appearance

A deeply rooted idea that appears almost universally in Western philosophy is that the world is constituted by unperceivable, unalterable *substance* that carries a *form* of particular features perceived in reality. Change is the change not of substance but of the particulars it carries. In Platonic philosophy, the lure of substance yields the idea of universal, immutable *ideas* in a world beyond reality, which may be grasped by exceptional, trained minds. In Christianity, God is a transcendent entity about which theology can infer properties, either positively, about what God is, along the *via positiva*, or negatively, along the *via negativa*, about what God is not. In the Neo-platonic view, Platonic ideas lie in the mind of God. For mystics, God is ineffable.

The self also is seen in substantial terms, as a more or less unitary, enduring carrier of characteristics. Under the influence of Buddhist philosophy, David Hume deviated from this, as I will discuss in a later item.

In Hindu, Vedic philosophy there is substance in the form of a transcendent being (*Brahman*), which is the source of all value, and is ineffable and accessible only to the initiated, in wordless contemplation. Language creates illusions and is not fit to capture the transcendent, the thing in itself.

Buddhism renounces all substance, and sees the world as impermanent, conditioned, a whirl of particulars, and a source of sorrow. The self is an illusion, caught in suffering, but by lengthy, proper training and discipline, enlightenment can be reached in *Nirwana,* in life, where the illusory self with its thirsts and cravings can be renounced, to achieve a life of peace and serenity. Here also, language creates illusions, and is to be superseded by wordless contemplation.

How difficult it was, in Western philosophy, to shed the notion of substance, is highlighted in the development of Schopenhauers philosophy. To recall: Kant proposed that man construes perceived reality on the basis of categories of space, time and causality, and cannot know the underlying *thing in itself.* For Schopenhauer, the thing in itself is not outside us, but inside us, in an insatiable *will to life*, as the source of all sorrow, and can, according to his early work, be grasped by introspection, in self-consciousness. The sorrow sown by an insatiable will is comparable to the Buddhist notion of suffering due to an illusion of self, with its thirsts and cravings.

Moira Nichols[2] argued that under the influence of Eastern philosophy, Schopenhauer began to shift his ideas. The thing in itself now becomes accessible only to the initiated, the sage and ascetic, and it is more than will to life. Escape from the suffering of the will to life is achieved in transcendence that is available only to the initiated. As in Buddhist Nirwana, it goes together with the transcendence of the egotistic self in compassion for humanity as a whole. But unlike Buddhism, for Schopenhauer the thing in itself still appears to remain substantial, an entity beyond the world, and in that it is more Vedantic than Buddhist. As the Brahman of Vedic Hinduism, it constitutes the world and is the source of all value, not only of sorrow. If all this is correct, it amounts to a fairly radical shift, or even negation, of Schopenhauers earlier views.

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[2] 'Influences of Eastern thought on Schopenhauer', in Mcfie, Alexander Lyon (ed.), 2003, *Eastern influences on Western philosophy,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 187-219..

134. Notions of the self

It is a common thought that promises and commitments require a self that is constant, being in future what it is now and wanting what it wants now. I find that a suffocating notion of self and other. In my view, commitment is aimed at ongoing interaction with someone for mutual growth, mentally, spiritually or economically. Some stability of relationship is required to utilize its potential, but not fixity of self.

According to Buddhism and David Hume, who appears to have been inspired by Buddhism, the self is an illusion that results from misguided thinking in terms of substance. There is only a flux of momentary perceptions, thoughts and feelings without a self. There is as little underlying substance behind 'I think' as in the phrase 'it rains'. Montaigne also had this insight.

In Buddhism one can surrender the illusion of self in intense, disciplined meditation, freeing oneself from the miseries of life that follow from the thirst and cravings of the self, in peace of mind and feeling at one with the world, in *Nirwana.* Here, there is a parallel to Schopenhauers notion of the will to life as the source of all misery.

In eastern philosophy there is also a stream, but not a dominant one, that does not surrender but seeks the individual self (*purusha*) but that was static, eternal, and autonomous.

While I accept that the self is not unitary but fragmented into multiple, shifting aspects of self, and is 'on the move', constructed and reconstructed in experience, I do think there still is a workable notion of identity, as I discussed in item 8 of this blog. If we surrender all notions of the self, how can we, indeed, still talk of intentions and agency? What remains of character? The self is the seat of action in the world, and we live to employ it in that way.

For Kierkegaard also, as for me, the self is not a compound but a process, in a dialectic of inside and outside. He said: the self is a relation that relates itself to its own self. That may sound mystifying, but I think it is exactly right. It can be explained if we turn to Damasio's account, discussed in item 8 of this blog, and repeated here, as follows. The brain forms images or 'maps', in neuronal structures, of the interior body, of organs. Those internal images in the brain are fed by the physiology of organs, and in turn play a role in the regulation of those organs. Next, from observation of external objects and experience with actions those body maps are affected, and a new level of images or maps arises. Here, from interaction with the outside world the notion arises of the self as an independent player in that world. Next that leads to the build-up of a biographical self, with memories of earlier experiences, and expectations and plans for the future, and the whole of all that forms the identity of the self.

In my argument for *otherhumanism* I did plead for *kenosis* or 'emptying the self', in the sense of opening up to the other human being, in empathy and benevolence, and inviting its opposition. But I pleaded for that not to lose the self but to enhance its flourishing.

The self needs the other to free itself from its prejudices and to grow, intellectually and spiritually, on the basis of opposition from the other to which one must learn to open up, in

empathy. I argued that this even yields economic advantage by utilizing differences between people to create innovation by *novel combinations.*

136. Productive ambiguity   published 10-3-2014

In this blog I have identified three issues concerning ideas and their meaning.

First, while we need universals, they should not be seen as absolutes, applying everywhere and always. I discussed that also in the preceding item in this blog. Meanings change according to contexts of application. Sentence meaning depends on word meaning but also, vice versa, word meaning depends on sentence meaning. What a word means depends on other words in the sentence, and the practical context in which it is uttered. This notion that ideas and meanings change in their application, depending on how they work in living one's life, is part of the pragmatist view.

Second, understanding and interpretation are formed by mental categories that are formed along life paths, and hence vary between people. That is the constructivist view. This variety of cognition is a source of both misunderstanding and learning. It leads to a plea for recognition of the importance of the other for oneself, and of dialogue, in knowledge and ethics.

Third, but related to the above, there is no uniquely identifiable 'truth' in knowledge, in the sense of *correspondence* with some external, objective, substantial reality. Instead, I advocated a view of truth as *warranted assertibility.* Also, there is no unique, identifiable meaning to what an author wrote, and authors say more than they mean: new meanings and interpretations may be added to what they wrote. That is the hermeneutic view.

As a result, there are several forms of ambiguity, all around us, in the context dependence, shift and multiplicity of meanings. To deal with this, with reference to Pascal I proposed to consider the *spirit of finesse* next to the *spirit of geometry.* And I proposed to see all this as instances of *imperfection on the move.*

I give this summary because it may help to understand and utilize ancient Chinese philosophy, which incorporates ideas similar to those of pragmatism and hermeneutics. I am thinking here, in particular, of Taoist texts (the texts named after Lao, Zhuang and Lie)[3]. To a Western mind, they are notoriously difficult to understand. I have had a hard time trying. But I see the attempt as an exercise in practising what I have preached. I find that what I have been saying is congenial to old Chinese thought. Hence, I may learn more by immersing myself in it, in trying to see how in those old texts meanings hang together and depend on context, how they shift according to shifts of context. Perhaps the endeavour to understand the texts is not entirely hopeless.

As a Westerner, educated and trained in rational, analytical, empirical thought and practice, I am used to rigorous, clear, unambiguous and logical argument. But I am aware that if indeed

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[3] Here I am making use of Steve Coutinho, *An introduction to Daoist philosophies,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. Coutinho cautions that while there a commonalities there is also diversity within Taoist thought. But I think that applies to all streams of philosophy: pragmatism, enlightenmen thought, analytic philosophy, etc. It applies, more widely, to the meanings of words. It is the rule rather than an exception. It is an exception only to those who expect essences everywhere.

universals are problematic and context matters, and shifts of meaning occur in the use of ideas across contexts, then ambiguity can be productive. And perhaps the most adequate form of reasoning and presentation is narrative, where ideas are exemplified in stories, and understanding progresses by exploring analogous cases (as Coutinho put it). If dialogue is key to understanding, then that is what one may expect in philosophical writing. Narrative philosophizing is not, I admit, where my strength lies. And I keep on striving for clarity, coherence, consistency and rigour of argument whenever possible. But I try to be open to requisite and productive ambiguity.

A deeply rooted idea that appears almost universally in Western philosophy is that the world is constituted by unperceivable, unalterable *substance* that carries a *form* of particular features perceived in reality. Change is the change not of substance but of the particulars it carries. In Platonic philosophy, the lure of substance yields the idea of universal, immutable *ideas* in a world beyond reality, which may be grasped by exceptional, trained minds. In Christianity, God is a transcendent entity about which theology can infer properties, either positively, about what God is, along the *via positiva*, or negatively, along the *via negativa,* about what God is not. In the Neo-platonic view, Platonic ideas lie in the mind of God. For mystics, God is ineffable.

The self also is seen in substantial terms, as a more or less unitary, enduring carrier of characteristics. Under the influence of Buddhist philosophy, David Hume deviated from this, as I will discuss in a later item.

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Buddhism renounces all substance, and sees the world as impermanent, conditioned, a whirl of particulars, and a source of sorrow. The self is an illusion, caught in suffering, but by lengthy, proper training and discipline, enlightenment can be reached in *Nirwana,* in life, where the illusory self with its thirsts and cravings can be renounced, to achieve a life of peace and serenity. Here also, language creates illusions, and is to be superseded by wordless contemplation.

How difficult it was, in Western philosophy, to shed the notion of substance, is highlighted in the development of Schopenhauers philosophy. To recall: Kant proposed that man construes perceived reality on the basis of categories of space, time and causality*,* and cannot know the underlying *thing in itself.* For Schopenhauer, the thing in itself is not outside us, but inside us, in an insatiable *will to life*, as the source of all sorrow, and can, according to his early work, be grasped by introspection, in self-consciousness. The sorrow sown by an insatiable will is comparable to the Buddhist notion of suffering due to an illusion of self, with its thirsts and cravings.

Moira Nichols[4] argued that under the influence of Eastern philosophy, Schopenhauer began to shift his ideas. The thing in itself now becomes accessible only to the initiated, the sage and ascetic, and it is more than will to life. Escape from the suffering of the will to life is achieved

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[4] 'Influences of Eastern thought on Schopenhauer', in Mcfie, Alexander Lyon (ed.), 2003, *Eastern influences on Western philosophy,* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 187-219..

in transcendence that is available only to the initiated. As in Buddhist Nirwana, it goes together with the transcendence of the egotistic self in compassion for humanity as a whole. But unlike Buddhism, for Schopenhauer the thing in itself still appears to remain substantial, an entity beyond the world, and in that it is more Vedantic than Buddhist. As the Brahman of Vedic Hinduism, it constitutes the world and is the source of all value, not only of sorrow. If all this is correct, it amounts to a fairly radical shift, or even negation, of Schopenhauers earlier views.

137. Yin and Yang: contrasts and complements   published 17-3-2014

Western philosophy is full of opposites, in dichotomies, such as: dark and light, night and day, construction and destruction, high and low, in and out, spirit and matter, good and evil, being and non-being, …. Ideally, analytically, it is one or the other; there is no third possibility.

In fact, often the opposites shade into each other or come together. At daybreak, dark shades into light, and vice versa at dusk. The porch of a house lies between inside and outside. In creative destruction, construction arises from destruction. Between being and non-being there are emergence and decay. Sometimes bad actions are needed to do good, and good actions misfire. Spirit (mind) is embodied in matter (brain).

However, in Western thought opposition prevails, and change is seen as antagonistic, as Coutinho (2014) proposes, arising from the conflict of opposites. This goes back to Heraclitus and we find it in Nietzsche. In the Western notion of *dialectics*, out of opposition between thesis and antithesis a synthesis may arise. Yet it remains a battle between opposites, not a blending in complementarity.

In Chinese philosophy, by contrast, complementarity prevails, where apparent opposites are contrasts, as parts of a unified process, coming together, typically in an organic, circular movement where they emerge from each other and yield to each other, as in winter and summer. Here, change is not imposed from outside but arises from within.

This applies, in particular, to the pair of *Yin* and *Yang*.[5] The root meanings of the two are the dark slope (Yin) and the light slope (Yang) of a mountain (In the northern hemisphere: the north and the south side). Going from there, the following distinctive features arise.

Yin	Yang
dark	light
moisture (mist and rain on the north slope)	dryness
downward movement, descent	upward movement, ascent
soft soil	hard
nurturing	challenging
receptiveness, fertility	filling, impregnation
integration	disintegration
yielding	conquering, leading
harmony, rest	conflict, tension, energetic
closing down	opening up

[5] Here again, I use: Steve Coutinho, *An introduction to Daoist philosophies,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

female   male

The concepts are relative. The moon is yin with respect to the yang of the sun but it is yang to the yin of the dark sky. The male can be more or less female.

They are counterparts, complementary, succeeding and transforming into each other, building on each other, in an ongoing cycle of change, as in the succession of seasons. They are mutually yielding, blending into each other, 'across a penumbra of vagueness' (Coutinho 2014, p. 42).

Most importantly, from my interest in processes of change, the pair of yin and yang promises a view of change as internally generated, immanent, within nature, not as engineered from outside by some transcendent, outside power.

In particular, in the next item in this blog I will consider whether there are similarities, points of contact, or opportunities for cross-fertilization, between yin/yang and the cycle of change by assimilation and accommodation that I proposed, in items 31 and 35 of this blog. That also is a circle of succession of opening up and closing down, of disintegration and integration.

138. Cycles of change: Yin/Yang and discovery   published 23-3-2014

The economist Schumpeter proposed that innovation arises out of 'novel combinations', in surprising connections between elements from previously unconnected areas of thought or practice. Here I raise the question whether perhaps there are fruitful connections between the dynamic of Yin and Yang, indicated in the preceding item of this blog, and the 'cycle of discovery', developed in my earlier work, which I summarized in items 31 and 35 of this blog.

In Taoism, the interaction between Yin and Yang, between integration and disintegration, is taken to produce and change the universe, to create being and non-being.

In the cycle of discovery also, novelty arises from a succession of integration and disintegration, which results from an opening and closing of context and content, of practices or theories.

I start with a summary of my cycle.

In *generalization* an existing mental scheme or practice is applied to novel contexts. It is an opening up to new contexts. Generalization is needed for four reasons. First, to escape from the existing order in the present area of practice. Second, to obtain fresh insights into the limitations of existing practice. Third, to create pressure for change fr the sake of survival, in the novel context. Fourth, to obtain insight into alternatives. Generalization can be real, as in a new market for an existing product, or a new field of application of a technology, or it can be virtual, as in a computer simulation, laboratory experiment, or a thought experiment.

To survive in the new conditions the scheme is *differentiated* in an attempt to deal with them. For this one taps from existing repertoires of possibilities and capabilities learned from previous experience. It is still integrative in that sense, though it begins to open up to variety. If that does not yield survival, one tries to adopt elements of local practices that appear to be

successful where one's own practice fails, in *reciprocation.* Here the basis is laid for an opening up of content. This yields hybrids that allow experimentation with novel elements to explore their potential, while maintaining the basic logic or design principles of the old practice. One next obtains insight into the obstacles from the old architecture that prevent the full utilization of the potential that novel elements have now shown. This yields indications for more fundamental opening up of content, in changes in the architecture, in *accommodation.* That is disintegrative.

Next, the new architecture, with old and new elements, is still tentative, requiring much experimentation and subsidiary changes, and elimination of redundancies and inappropriate leftovers from old practice, in a process of *consolidation*. Here there is re-integration into a unified whole. There is often competition between alternative designs, which mostly results in a *dominant design.* In this process there a renewed focus, in a tailoring to a specific context, a closing down of context. And next, to get away from that one again needs the opening up of generalization, and the circle is closed.

The logic is captured succinctly as a succession of closure of content (in a dominant design), opening of context (in generalization), opening of content (reciprocation, accommodation), closure of context, and again closure of content (in a dominant design), with integration in consolidation and disintegration in accommodation.

Does this parallel between Yin/Yang and the cycle of discovery make sense? Does it help to elucidate the former? If it makes sense, then in the stage of reciprocation Yin and Yang are most difficult to separate. It is Yin in the attempt at ongoing integration into basic logic or architecture, but Yang in bringing in the variety that leads up to disintegration.

Can I learn from Yin/Yang to improve the cycle of discovery? In Taoist thought ultimately the integrativeness of Yin is mostly seen to be the most fundamental force, while I have tended to focus on the Yang of creative destruction, in accommodation. Perhaps I have not fully appreciated consolidation.

My predilection towards Yang is reflected also in a pro-innovation bias in present, atleast
        Western, society. Stability is associated with conservatism, which is
seen to be antithetical to progress. But without the stability of Yin, Yang becomes neurotic
        and erratic.

139. Nietzsche and Eastern philosophy   published 1-4-2014

With Buddhism, Nietzsche shares an engagement with the flux, shift, proliferation and transformation of phenomena in the world, without any absolute, immutable substance, including the self, which has no unified, fixed identity. This entails uncertainty, contingency, vulnerability and suffering.

With Taoism, Nietzsche shares recourse to nature, away from the artefacts of ethics, and of social and cultural rules and rituals (*wu-wei*, in Taoism). Nietzsche was certainly not a Confucian.

However, Buddhism seeks an escape, yielding rest and serenity, equanimity, in Nirwana. Taoism also seeks the achievement of invulnerability, serenity, in an awareness of the puniness of human life and concerns, a form of indifference, in the perspective of the vastness, all-encompassingness, unendingness, incomprehensibility and ineffability of nature.

In Western philosophy, the Stoics sought such invulnerability and serenity (*ataraxia*). For Nietzsche that is escapism, decadence, a denial of life and nature. Nietzsche accepts the flux, uncertainty, strife and pain, as part of life, and as a source of strength, something to be engaged in rather than to be transcended or dodged.

In the nihilistic rejection of immutable absolutes, as humanly impossible to achieve, or even as undesirable, Nietzsche distinguished between passive nihilism, in submission and a striving for invulnerability, and active nihilism, which engages nihilism, welcomes it as a challenge and opportunity.

With Nietzsche nature culminates in the will to power, a noble combat, an agonistic striving for transformation, not a flight from flux but engagement in it, the making of it. The sorrow and pain of life are to be embraced, to be accepted, in a love of fate, even they were to recur and recur forever.

In his early work, Nietzsche made a distinction between Apollo, as a principle of form, balance, harmony, and serenity, in art, and Dionysus, as a force of nature, creative destruction, rupture of form, and ecstasy, as I discussed in item 81 in this blog. In his later philosophy, of the will to power, Nietzsche was definitely on the Dionysian side.

The dynamism of Dionysus is reminiscent of Tao as a force of nature. For Nietzsche, the Dionysian and the Apollonian alternate, in a cycle, an eternal return of ascent and descent. The eternal return is to be accepted, even rejoiced in, taking the good and the bad.

In two preceding items in this blog I discussed Yin and Yang, where Yin is the movement towards stability, harmony, quiet, integration, nurturing, while Yang is the agonistic, strong, wilful, disintegrating force. Together, in their succession, interaction, and their merging, they drive life and nature. Is there a parallel here with the cycle of the Dionysian and the Apollonian in Nietzsche?

In this blog I have embraced flux, in what I have called 'imperfection on the move', an ongoing striving for perfection without the hope or even desire of ever achieving a final end of rest and perfection. I indicated that while ultimately in Eastern philosophy Yin is the more fundamental principle. I noted that in my 'cycle of discovery', in line with my interest in innovation and entrepreneurship, I lean towards Yang. In that, I am a Nietzschean.

140. Montaigne on the move   published 7-42-14

A central theme in this blog is movement, change: in development, evolution, discovery, and meaning. In preceding items I have been looking at change as an alternation, interaction, a merging and separation, between a principle of stability (Yin) and a principle of impetus (Yang).

Movement plays an important role in the philosophy of Montaigne, in contrast with most other Western philosophers. Might there be a connection with Yin and Yang? Here I make use of a treatise on movement in Montaigne by Jean Starobinsky[i].

Montaigne also holds a cyclical, organic view of change, but he does not reject acting in the world, as Taoism did (in *wuwei*).

However, having acted in public functions, among others as a member of the parliament of Bordeaux, in 1571, at the age of 38, Montaigne withdrew to the tower of his castle to reflect. He retired from what he saw as the posturing, hypocrisy, bragging, superficiality and mindlessness of public life and discourse.

To his dismay he next discovered that in solitude his thoughts flew off, chaotically, incoherently, in all directions. He realized that he needed some outside anchor to arrest his thoughts in some stability and coherence. He turned to the attempt to capture thoughts in writing them down. This led to his *Essais*.

Montaigne had a humanist orientation towards justice and empathy towards others, a strong sense of social responsibility, and an orientation towards others as an essential part of life. He granted that any criticism towards others might also be directed against himself.

However, a strong condition for external involvement was the preservation of his peace of mind and moral integrity. Montaigne remained inward looking, oriented towards the self as the sole arbiter. In my reading he failed to recognize that one needs not merely contributions to society, and receptive readers, but active opposition, in dialogue, as a test of one's ideas, to escape from one's own prejudice and blindness, as I have argued in this blog.

Next, Montaigne turned to a contrast between body and mind. The body represents heaviness, inertia, and the mind lightness, impetus. The body is needed to stabilize the mind, and the mind is needed to mobilize the body. Life is a flow of interaction between he two.

I find this interesting because it reminds me of the claim, which I adopted from Damasio (in item 8 of this blog), that it is the coming together of neural and other physiological processes, in embodied cognition, with the body as a focus, a locus of coordinated activity and mental maps, which creates some coherence and stability of identity.

Montaigne saw movement, in interaction of mind and body, not as continuous movement, somehow in between stability and change, heaviness and lightness, but as an alternation and interaction between the two. And indeed, if one watches an athlete in slow motion, one sees a flow of movement with a rhythmic succession of restraint and release. One sees it also in ballet. I quote Starobinski: '.. the paradoxical marriage of passive surrender and active grasp, of relaxation and effort' (p. 445, my translation).

Montaigne generalizes this to the good life, as an alternation, a feeding into each other, of mental and bodily pause and action, weight and lightness, rational restraint and spontaneous abandon, artifice and nature.

As a dance through life.

To me, this is attractive, and it sounds like a description, or perhaps a manifestation, of Yin and Yang.

I would add: it is even better to have dancing partners. It takes two to tango.

141. The soft power of Yin   published 14-4-2014

In Taoism, of the two forces of Yin and Yang, Yin is seen as the most fundamental. This, I believe, connects with the role and importance of trust versus control that I discussed in items 68 to 75 of this blog.

The comparison may work as indicated in the table below.

Yin	Yang
yielding, submission	conquering, control
→	→
cooperation	rivalry
altruism	egotism

In items 54 and 55 I discussed the intellectual, spiritual and moral importance of collaboration, and in item 66 its economic importance. In item 67 I discussed the ensuing problems of collaboration. Later in this blog, in a series on economics and markets I will elaborate on these themes.

A large literature, in economics and business, has given attention to the tension between collaboration and rivalry, and in dealing with them, the tension between trust and control. Both are needed. Rivalry is needed for achievement, efficiency and innovation from competition. That is Yang.

On the other hand, often mental, spiritual and economic flourishing arise from utilizing differences between people (and organizations), or what I called *cognitive distance.* That requires an investment that is *specific* to the relationship, i.e. is lost when the relationship breaks. Thus, the investment will made and will come to fruition only when there is a perspective for a certain duration of the relationship. That requires mutual forbearance and yielding to each others interests, and the the building and maitenance of trust. That is Yin.

So the Yang of innovation and breakthrough needs the Yin of stability, forbearance and trust.

Specific investments create dependence, and a risk of losing the investment if the partner breaks the relationship. There is a Yang way and a Yin way of dealing with such risks of dependence.

The Yang way is power play and control, by hierarchy, in monitoring and imposing constraints on conduct, or by incentives, threats and rewards, to elicit proper conduct. There is an underlying threat of *exit*, breaking a relationship, when demands are not satisfied.

The Yin way is give and take, in *voice*, openness in deliberation to identify problems and cooperate to solve them, based on trust.

Yin is certainly the most difficult of the two, requiring wisdom, constraint, and empathy. It is also the most rewarding, in terms of both costs (lower costs of control) and revenues (more depth of relationship), as well as in intrinsic value of the relationship.

Here, as elsewhere, Yin and Yang are complementary, and they meet. Trust needs to begin where control ends and control needs to begin where trust ends. Behind voice there is exit as the last resort. A relationship may begin with control and soften intro trust when things go well. It may begin with trust but gather controls when risks increase or trust meets its limits.

Does the use of the notions of Yin and Yang help in these issues? Perhaps not. But it is still nice, to my taste, to see that some familiar issue in the economy can be fitted into such a wider philosophical matrix. And perhaps, the other way around, this issue of rivalry and collaboration may help to elucidate the notions of Yin and Yang, and to make them more concrete.

142. Limits of language   published 21-4-2014

In item 29 of this blog I proposed that abstract concepts, expressed in words, such as knowledge, memory, meaning, communication, peace, justice, identity, truth, and so on, are modelled in terms of metaphors from objects moving in time and space, while those are not necessarily adequate for that purpose. I called this the 'object bias'.

I proposed that the inclination to think that way derives from evolution, where survival depended on adequately identifying objects moving in time and space: hunting a prey, being hunted by the sabre-toothed tiger, aiming and tracing projectiles, enemies, etc.

Examples of the bias are the container metaphor (we are 'in' love, 'in' trouble), the transmission metaphor (communication as 'sending signals' along a 'communication channel'), 'putting forth' an argument, 'retrieving' a memory, etc.

The object bias concerning the notion of meaning yields the intuition that meaning is constant as it is shifted from one sentence or context of action to another, like a chair being moved from room to room. This masks the context-dependence of meaning.

The object bias also breeds misleading fundamental intuitions such as being as an object rather than as a process, the notion of substance as a 'carrier' of characteristics, essence as a defining ingredient. The notion of identity, of a person or culture, is misleadingly felt to require some essence (see items 8 and 9). The notion that something must be inside or outside a category, seen as a container, yields an abhorrence of ambiguity, of being both inside and outside, or neither. Ambiguity is as frightening as a leaking roof, or doubt whether the sabre-toothed tiger is inside or outside the cave.

It is a challenge to expand language and meaning beyond the object bias. In item 36 I discussed how meanings can be ambiguous, context dependent, and subject to change, along the *hermeneutic circle.* In item 105 I recalled Wittgenstein's idea of similarity without shared essence, on the basis of *family resemblance.*

Montaigne also was sceptical of the ability of language to grasp objective, outside reality, and employed language to express what he saw as an inner reality, in the self-searching of his *Essais*.

Taoism also, in its own way, was sceptical of language. One aspect of that is notion that the cosmos, the all-encompassing whole of natural forces, is ineffable. That notion of ineffability is familiar also, in the form of an ineffable God, among mystical streams in Christianity and the Islam. According to Taoism it also applies to wisdom. Since that transcends ordinary experience with its misleading linguistic categories, it cannot be entirely or adequately communicated with words.

From Coutinho[6] I learn that Taoism was also aware of what Gilbert Ryle called *knowing how* vs. *knowing what.* Knowing how is also known as *tacit knowledge*. In ordinary life it applies to the skill and artistry of an artisan, a motorcycle mechanic, a painter, or a musician, for example. According to Taoism it also applies to wisdom. Teaching wisdom, as a way of thinking and living, is largely by ostentation, with a master showing how, guiding practice in the training of an apprentice.

Clever metaphors may help to trigger steps in the groping for insight, skill, and mastery, as when in master class for violinists the maestro implores the playing to be 'more like a mountain stream in spring'. This may help, before we turn away in despair from the rational incomprehensibility of Taoist writing, to explain the preaching of silence and the use of baffling, bewildering metaphors, images and aphorisms in much of it.

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[i] Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en movement*, Editions Gallimard, 1993 [1982].

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[6] Steve Countinho, An introduction to Daoist philosophies, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014.