Report of the UNESCO Asia-Arab Interregional Philosophical Dialogues on Philosophy Facing the Challenges of Modern Technology

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Background

In recent times the teaching of philosophy in almost all regions of the world has been dominated by the writings of Western philosophers. This relates to the predominance of published works in European languages, to colonial ideologies, and to the higher output of postgraduate degrees in philosophy in North America and Europe, over the past two centuries. In order to strengthen local, regional and global awareness of the rich philosophical traditions of many regions of the world, UNESCO Social and Human Science Sector's program in philosophy has launched programmes on inter-regional philosophical dialogues in 2004. The programme currently has three working groups, and this one examines philosophy’s contribution to the potential and actual challenges of modern technology.

This was the second meeting of the Asia-Arab Interregional Philosophical Dialogues working group on Philosophy Facing the Challenges of Modern Technology, and was held following the first meeting held in 2006 in Rabat, organized by UNESCO Rabat. The philosophical dialogues are coordinated by the UNESCO offices in Bangkok and Rabat, in coordination with the Philosophy Section in UNESCO Paris headquarters. This meeting was hosted by the Regional Unit for Social and Human Sciences in Asia and the Pacific (RUSHSAP) of UNESCO Bangkok. This meeting was also held at the time of the 22nd World Congress of Philosophy.

Summary

There were thirty-three conference participants of evenly balanced gender from Australia, Canada, China, France, India, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Morocco, New Zealand, the Philippines, and the USA. Participants attended in their individual capacity and in addition to philosophy, they came from anthropology, engineering, education, political science and international relations, ethics, environmental studies, law, medicine, and religious studies, as well as persons from civil society organizations.

The working group had extensive interactive discussion on the role of philosophers in facing technology. Presenters were asked to give 15 minute talks, followed by questions and discussion. The presentations will be made available on the RUSHSAP website (http://www.unescobkk.org/rushsap). The meeting was jointly chaired by Darryl Macer, UNESCO Bangkok and Souria Saad Zooy, UNESCO Rabat, the project coordinators. The papers are expected to be published later.

Meeting Report

Dr Macer explained the role of the working group and noted that he wanted to bring philosophers back into relevance on the subject of war and peace. Dr. Macer also provided description of the ethics of science and technology program in UNESCO, explaining the background and providing an overview of the Asia-Arab Philosophical Interregional
Dialogues project. He provided brief descriptions of the working groups currently in the project, which include:

- Challenges of globalization to philosophy and democracy
- Philosophy facing the challenges of modern technology
- The roles of philosophy in war and peace

He discussed the background to UNESCO’s work in bioethics through the creation of the Bioethics Programme in 1993 and the establishment of external advisory bodies including the International Bioethics Committee (IBC), the Intergovernmental Bioethics Committee (IGBC), and the World Commission on Ethics of Scientific Knowledge and Technology (COMEST). He expressed hope that the Asia-Arab Interregional Philosophical Dialogues project would provide a forum for reflection and open dialogue on the philosophical issues relating to technology, and requested that participants consider a variety of options for project involvement. He confirmed the commitment of UNESCO to this theme, which is also consistent with the expressed desires of many people in all countries.

The first Presentation was “The Creation of a Harmonized Social System by a Holistic Approach” by Ms Kayo Uejima, director of the Lablink NGO in Japan. The main goal of Lablink is to help create a sustainable society, and the particular method it was advocating is to construct and disseminate a lifestyle and social system where persons can harmonize with other cultures and nature. To do this, she stated that it is essential that individuals understand their “selves”, so that (1) they have a greater sense of self-determination (to develop a sustainable society), and (2) they better understand that they are physiological beings and a part of nature. The former could include goals to further develop science and technology to help develop a sustainable future society, and the latter could incorporate ethics and philosophy to help guide the direction of such scientific and technological developments. She explained that understanding the “self” was the center of these phenomena, and therefore understanding it could lead to a modern philosophy which could transcend current science and thought. To better understand the “self”, she designed a series of meditation and relaxation exercises through her NGO, which she presented and demonstrated to the working group. Finally, she also presented her network of experts and supporters which were helping Lablink disseminate its ideas and practices.

Following the presentation, Dr Sivanandam Panneerselvam, professor of philosophy at the University of Madras in India, asked how one attains the self-realization that Ms Uejima introduced. He also asked whether self-realization includes divinity, or is somehow linked to divinity. Dr Sirajul Islam, a philosophy and religion reader at Visva-Bharati University in India, asked whether this is connected somehow to religion. Ms Uejima replied that there is no connection to religion or divinity. She reiterated that her concept of self-realization is a nested hierarchy of the “self”.

Dr Philip Cam, professor of philosophy at the University of New South Wales in Australia, asked whether Ms Uejima’s concept of self-realization is an inward or outward journey. He came from a tradition where the concept of self comes from a relation to others, and it is outward. He questioned whether, in a project with sustainable development, an inward journey would be applicable because such problems arise from complex human interaction (an apparently outward phenomenon).

The second presentation was “Ethical Issues and Governance of Stem Cell Research: Chinese Views” by Dr Yanguang Wang, professor of bioethics at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, China. Her presentation provided an overview of the Chinese situation regarding some major ethical issues involved with stem cell research. The Chinese
state law includes a number of guidelines regarding stem cell research and regulations have also been debated and passed in China to address some of the many ethical challenges surrounding this research. This includes the “Ethical Guiding Principles for Research on Human Embryonic Stem Cells (2003-460)” that was passed in 2003 by the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Health. Furthermore, the Ministry of Science and Technology passed new regulations on scientific misconduct in 2006. The Ministry of Health passed regulations on the ethical review of biomedical research involving human subjects in 2007. However, a number of concerns have been raised in China about the implementation of these regulations. These concerns especially relate to enforcement and compliance regarding the provision of ‘unproven’ stem cell treatments, as well as ethical debates.

She reported that there were objections from a small group of scientists and scholars of China. They argued that HES cell research should be forbidden, because if human beings go against the natural law, human beings will be punished by nature. HES cell research violates human dignity and therefore is an affront to human life. However, the majority of bioethicists from China argued that an embryo is not a person. An embryo is only a human biological life. A human embryo has a certain value, and it is due respect, but if there are valid reasons, it can be used in research. To the spared gametes or blastulas remaining after in vitro fertilization, and the fetal cells after natural or voluntarily selective abortion, the ethical issue is not an issue of “destructive embryo research.” It is a fact that the cells from embryos are already being destroyed. One Chinese bioethicist reviewed Western and Chinese thinking, and after weighing both pluralistic and single-criterion approaches to understanding how personhood and moral protectibility are established, the Chinese bioethicist concluded that although the embryo within the first 14 days warrants serious moral consideration as a developing form of human life, it does not have the same moral status as infants or children.

Dr Wang noted that guidelines have limited authority over researchers because they are not legally binding, and that adherence to these rules is enforced only for those receive funding from the government, which includes most researchers, but financially independent researchers or hospitals must simply answer to their own institution’s review board. It is feared that without more comprehensive oversight or firmer regulations, these guidelines may be circumvented. Dr Wang and other Chinese bioethicists believe it is necessary for China to take a further step in the field of bioethics legislation, to add the necessary provisions to the laws or regulations. However, adding the necessary provisions has become an increasingly laborious and slow process. Different Ministries overlap in areas of responsibility, and formulating laws and regulations involve consultations with numerous experts from the legal, bioethical, social and medical fields. Her hope was that China’s Ministry of Science and Technology, and the Ministry of Health, can work quickly to revise the ‘Ethical Guiding Principles’, or work out a better one, which is regulated by measure, technical norms and ethical principles, so that research on human embryonic stem cells can be implemented in detail.

Dr Ali Benmakhlouf, professor of philosophy at the University of Nice in France, revisited the issue of whether scientists want the Chinese government to clarify the law on stem cell hybrid research. He noted that there is a debate in France currently about whether what is not explicitly prohibited is (1) not permitted, or (2) permitted. Dr Wang said that the Chinese government has not been clear on this issue.
Dr Panneerselvam asked how Confucianism applies to embryos and stem cell research. Dr Wang replied that most Chinese do not consider the embryo to be a person, and traditional Confucianism supports this perspective.

Dr Benmakhlouf noted that French theologians do not want to deal with cutoff frontiers like, for instance, 20 weeks to consider an embryo a person or possessing consciousness, but scientists are comfortable with the idea. Dr Cam added his comments on Dr Benmakhlouf’s observations. He noted that the background to bioethics is technological and scientific, not philosophical. Theologians adopt a certain philosophical perspective, and insist on it and do not look into the technological aspects. Yet, conceptions of the person are shifting in response to nature. Theologians seem to be blocking inquiry into nature and this seems counterproductive. Nature and technological advances help us frame and understand better the philosophical questions.

Finally, Dr Benmakhlouf noted that many challenges still exist for philosophers to reflect on autonomy and informed consent principles, according to diverse cultural contexts. Relative informed consent exists in China, where there is a cosmic relationship to other affiliated persons, including family and relatives. He noted that an individual in China does not merely ask another to consent because one is an individual as part of a cosmic fabric of individuals and entities.

The third presentation was “Necessity of Sufi Culture and Ethics in the Age of Science and Technology: Indo-Arabian Perspectives” by Dr Sirajul Islam, a philosophy and religious studies reader at the University of Visva-Bharati in India. Dr Islam considered scientific and technological knowledge and its relationship to Sufism. Science and technology are basically dispassionate and inevitable academic disciplines in this modern era, because they dominate present world civilizations in their own styles, which extend unimaginable comforts in multifarious ways in all spheres of human beings. These eliminate biases and anomalies from its ambit but it does not mean that scientific and technological knowledge is the sole source of knowledge. Knowledge can be acquired through various media. Scientific and technological knowledge is mainly based upon the objective study of the facts and events. However, the objectivity of science and technology is not cut off from human life and society. Their objectivity, precision, exactness is intimately connected to humanitarian considerations.

Sufism is a religious mysticism which works for human development (khidmat-e-khalq) without any discrimination of caste, creed and religion. The motto is self-purification and purification of others. Sufism is different from other mysticism, and it does not alienate itself from society. Hence, Sufism is not antagonistic to scientific and technological improvements. It merely seeks a philanthropic attitude when dealing with all categories of knowledge and inventions so that the ecological balance of the world is not be disturbed. Its ethical practices, physical fitness, sound mind, sacred soul and beneficial attitude to all are effective instruments to preserve this world. In this new millennium conflicts have emerged in new shapes that are much more devastating and dangerous for human existence and security than before. Sophisticated technologies may be highly useful in saving this world in cooperative way. Sufi ethical practices and cultural teachings are to be added to this for global benefits.

After some discussion about whether such a presentation was more propagation of religious ideology or a critical analysis of Sufism and Islam in general, the discussion began to focus on the presentation’s more critical aspects. Dr Panneerselvam noted that in Hinduism,
there is no gradation of souls; rather, all souls are the same. How can there be a gradation of souls, and how can such a gradation help humanity? Dr Benmakhlouf made several remarks. First, in discussing ethical issues, which have to face history and facts, it is difficult to derive and deduce transcendental views because you may deny reality. Second, throughout Islamic history, there have been plural voices, which need to be heard. Society needs to listen to these plural voices, and one cannot merely interpret scriptures; one can say what a particular individual interprets scriptures only. Third, he noted that one of these plural voices says that the Koran says one must respect the “beautiful creature”, but this term is not defined. Dr Wang’s presentation showed that a lot of material from science/technology and history to draw from, but the scriptures do not define such a term. Thus, we must still inquire about this.

In the **General Discussion**, Dr Nesy summarized the presentations. Ms Uejima’s presentation provided a background for meditation to help individuals get in touch with their “self” to help sustainable development. Dr Wang pointed out weaknesses of governance over scientific and technological issues. For instance, the issue of whether an embryo is a person is a serious one, and one approach is to use philosophical analysis despite commercialization and governance. Dr Wang provided a conclusion for stronger bioethics legislation. The final presentation by Dr Islam was a religious (Sufi) perspective. Dr Nesy pointed out that Sufism may suffer from at least one issue of gender equality and human rights: Sufi has a dress code, so that women are not entirely free.

Ms Souria Saad-Zoy, a program specialist at UNESCO Rabat in Morocco, then introduced the discussion, searching for links between the day’s presentations and the Asia-Arab Interregional Philosophical Dialogues that took place in Rabat, Morocco in 2004. She asked whether, and how, the working group could target the link and explain the work of the dialogues. Ms Saad-Zoy noted that the work product of the dialogue should create a bridge between the social sciences and policy-making as well as create strong links between the Asian and Arab regions, but that the objectives of the dialogues had to be agreed to first. Students and younger members of society should be invited to join the dialogues. She also noted that a mailing list had been created by UNESCO Bangkok. She asked how we could encourage dialogue between the meetings and follow-up on them. Finally, how might policy-makers get involved in the working group’s activities?

Dr Philip Cam said that this is a philosophical dialogue and, therefore, an inquiry process. If it is philosophical, working group attendees should bring ideas and hypotheses for discussion, and not positions. Furthermore, any topic for discussion needs to be better defined, rather than remaining vague, because otherwise a thoughtful and focused dialogue may not occur and is difficult to stimulate. It is better to find a specific question to probe into a particular issue and gather two or more persons to address the question, preferably from different sides. Dr Macer noted that Ms Lana Issa, an Iraqi scholar who was an intern at RUSHSAP at UNESCO Bangkok, has been posting thought-provoking issues on the mailing list for discussion. Mailing list members have been responding to these. Dr Cam added that if the question is well-framed, then a focused and positive response is more likely to result. Participants thought that these email exchanges had been useful, and would be useful in the future.

Dr Benmakhlouf noted that there are three Asia-Arab Interregional Philosophical Dialogues themes: (1) war and peace; (2) philosophy facing the challenges of modern technology, and (3) globalization and democracy. He supported Dr Cam’s position that we have to restrict and be specific about the themes. Dr Cam noted that perhaps the theme should
be supported by the philosophy of technology. Dr Macer noted that on the theme of ethics of science has included a heterogeneous mixture of themes.

Dr Panneerselvam noted that there were interesting presentations, but considered that there should be clearer objectives of the dialogues. Whatever the objectives of the dialogues, whatever they, have to include an interregional philosophical and critical analysis of issues. It is a dialogue between civilizations. We need to apply a framework, and need to make concepts clear. Dr Islam added that in this particular dialogue, the discussion needs to have a technological management aspect, because it focuses on challenges of modern technology to philosophy. One way of achieving this is to brainstorm the merits and demerits of technological thought. Dr Macer said that the Asia-Arab Interregional Philosophical Dialogues should report at the level of philosophical and ethical principles. This would distinguish it from other types of dialogue and promote the freedom of philosophy and critical analysis. Ms Uejima added that if philosophy is to contribute to society’s evolution, it is important to create a target or objective for the conference, because policy-makers are looking for concrete strategies. She also noted that a network was required to link the whole and parts together. Dr Benmakhlouf noted that one of the main topics of comparative philosophy is dialogues, so the issue is how to get harmonization between diverse cultural backgrounds and positive science. For instance, one could ask how philosophy depends on a culture or cultures. There may be a result, for instance, which can be used to promote translations and bridge cultures. Dr Nesy added that this is a meeting to discuss philosophy itself facing challenges from technology. Thus, one point is that philosophy has changed during different times, and there are different philosophies – Indian, western, etc.

Dr Naoshi Yamawaki, professor of philosophy at the University of Tokyo in Japan, stated that there is a new type of philosophy for the 21st century which aims to integrate disciplines in policy-making, to explore the linkages and make it more interdisciplinary, bridge differences, and manage them. They cover diverse areas, including science and technology, ethics, media, education, religion, etc. Ms Saad-Zoy said that the group needs an interdisciplinary approach because the report will be shared with policy-makers, who are practical.

Mr Urtnasan Norov, of the Mongolian National Commission for UNESCO, noted that it is should the group’s aim to disseminate the results of its discussions. He also reminded participants that the main purpose of UNESCO activities was the professional interpretation of challenges but also the dissemination of ideas to the public. How could the group propagate these ideas? Dr Cam asked about which results the group should disseminate, and how it could engage in dialogue with the public sphere and policy-makers. Rather than handing over a finished product, we should engage directly with such parties.

The discussion was resumed in the following day, in the working group on Globalization and Democracy (separate report). Dr. Macer thanked the assistance of the Department of Philosophy of Seoul National University in providing the room, and of the Korean National Commission for UNESCO for providing logistical assistance and drinks.