



# Inter-Regional Philosophical Dialogues: Asia and the Arab World

16-17 November 2004  
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris

Meeting Report

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Tuesday, 16 November 2004

## 1. Opening Session

### **Welcoming Remarks by Mr. Pierre Sané, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences at UNESCO:**

The Assistant Director-General (ADG) welcomed the participants to the meeting and thanked the scholars who came from distant countries. He underscored the importance of the meeting as an initial step in promoting a dialogue between philosophers from all the regions of the world. Such a dialogue, he said, will feed into the *Global Agenda of the United Nations for a Dialogue Among Civilizations*. The aim in launching the new project Inter-Regional Philosophical Dialogues is threefold: (i) to support mutual learning and understanding of the world's traditions of philosophical thought; (ii) to encourage intellectual partnerships in exploring the contemporary challenges to philosophical research and study; and (iii) to foster intellectual cooperation and exchange amongst scholars. The objective of this first brainstorming meeting with philosophers from Asia and the Arab world is to adopt a participatory approach in launching such a programme, inviting philosophers of the regions to give intellectual guidance and direction to this new programme. During the meeting, the participants will be asked to reflect on a short-term and long-term action-plan which will be implemented by UNESCO with its key partners. The ADG also made an announcement concerning the third UNESCO Philosophy Day. The Day was to take place on 18 November 2004, with a public colloquium on the Inter-Regional Philosophical Dialogues.

### **Welcoming Remarks by H. E. Mrs Samira Hanna-El-Daher, Vice-President of the Arab Group at UNESCO:**

The Ambassador highlighted the importance of philosophy for humanity, emphasizing its particular relevance in today's society. Philosophy is a humanising discipline, and is founded on the interrogation of the human condition. She emphasized that 'Oriental philosophy' is particularly important as a complement to the Western philosophical tradition rooted in rationalism and logic. The Arab world is today called upon by the international community to act as a catalyst of dialogue and reflection. For this reason, the Arab group at UNESCO is interested in this particular philosophical Dialogue. The Ambassador concluded by thanking and congratulating the Assistant Director-General on this dynamic initiative.

Adoption of the agenda of the meeting.<sup>1</sup>

Nomination of Chairs and Rapporteurs of the meeting, as well as of a Working Group whose aim is the drafting of a UNESCO action-plan for the Dialogues.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Annex I

<sup>2</sup> See Annex III

## 2. Summary Presentations for Asia and the Arab Region

Prof. Yersu Kim, former Secretary-General of the National Commission of the Republic of Korea for UNESCO, and Prof. Fathi Triki of the UNESCO Philosophy Chair in Tunisia, were both asked by UNESCO to prepare a summary of the various contributions by the scholars.

### **Presentation by Prof. Yersu Kim, Former Secretary-General, National Commission of the Republic of Korea for UNESCO:**

Prof. Kim first gave a historical background of Asian and Arab philosophy. He stressed the importance of understanding what is meant by philosophy in these two regions. He said commonalities have to be found in the two philosophical traditions, which would contribute to their mutual understanding. According to him, it is important to grasp the particularity of these traditions in order to develop “a pluralistic conception of philosophy.” Prof. Kim proposed that the objectives of the Dialogues should be: to re-forge the cultural identity of people of Asia and the Arab world and promote a new theory of the ‘self’ – a cosmopolitan ‘self’; to promote ‘glocal’ public philosophy in order to deal with contemporary global public issues, such as coexistence, terrorism, globalization, the consequences and the future of technological development, and the problems of morality and spirituality; and to study what he calls ‘integrated humanism’.

To achieve these objectives, the following are some ideas for a UNESCO action-plan:<sup>3</sup>

- Exchanging young scholars and lecturers from the two regions, with a particular accent on women;
- Publishing journals, anthologies and monographs;
- Conducting studies examining the relationship between philosophy and society in the two regions;
- Revising school curricula with the aim of promoting inter-regional understanding, such as the inclusion of teaching of Arabic ways of thought in Asian universities and of Asian thought in Arabic universities;
- Encouraging comparative studies of the two regions;
- Establishing a UNESCO Center for Global Studies, where such issues as peace, human rights, democracy could be studied;
- Creating a world databank for philosophy.

### **Presentation by Prof. Fathi Triki, UNESCO Philosophy Chair in Tunisia:**

Prof. Triki presented a summary of the contributions of the philosophers from the Arab world, stressing the need for an inter-cultural and inter-philosophical dialogue within the context of globalisation. He stressed the importance of thinking together about the possibility of a new kind of philosophy for cross-cultural co-existence. He also underscored the necessity of a dialogue between different philosophical traditions in order to counterweight the Eurocentrism of today’s mainstream philosophy. Philosophical dialogues, in addition, can serve to foster tolerance, mutual understanding, and to promote human values. Philosophy of religion should also be given proper acknowledgement. For him, the principal themes that the Dialogues should treat are: ethics, history of philosophy, poverty, social justice, democracy and liberalism, terrorism, globalisation and human security. The following are some ideas from the philosophers of the Arab region for a UNESCO action-plan:

- Encouraging exchange and the circulation of ideas;

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<sup>3</sup> See Annex IV for a full list

- Setting up annual meetings between philosophers from the two regions;
- Establishing inter-regional research groups for topics identified as common in the philosophical traditions of Asia and the Arab world.

Prof. Triki concluded by saying that UNESCO Philosophy Chairs should be mobilised as focal points for the implementation of the Dialogues programme.

### 3. General Discussion

All the participants welcomed this project and congratulated UNESCO on this initiative. For some, dialogue is necessary to counter the obstacles of prejudice and fanaticism, as well as to narrow the cognitive gulf between Asia and the Arab region. Others, however, disagreed with the assumption that there is mutual ignorance between the two worlds. Several philosophers underlined the importance of fostering knowledge about non-European philosophy, stressing that UNESCO needs to promote the teaching of non-European philosophies in the Universities, and to demystify these various kinds of philosophies from the exoticism usually associated with them.

#### The Focus of the Dialogues

##### 1) *Universality or Particularity?*

Some participants noted the need to clarify the notion of philosophy in the two regions. The issue was raised as to the commonality and divergence between thinkers from these regions. For some, there is a need to ask why a dialogue between the Arab world and Asia is necessary, and to identify themes which are of common interest in the regions in question.

Several speakers stressed the importance of the role of reason when talking about universality in philosophy. Philosophy is by its essence universal, since all philosophers pose the same questions, notably related to ethics and values in life. The Dialogues therefore need to be based on a broad vision of humanism which transcends individual cultures and regions and which should lead to the study of such concepts as duty and obligation.

Nevertheless, some experts asked whether values, such as sympathy and empathy, are to be considered as universal or as regional/local. For them, in an era of globalisation when philosophy is becoming 'professionalized' and therefore 'Europeanised', philosophers cannot ignore the concept of cultural identity. Therefore, although students of philosophy are concerned with universal problems, the cultural context needs always to be kept in mind.

##### 2) *Themes and Directions*

Discussing particular themes for the Dialogues, some participants proposed to include an analysis of religion, focusing on the concept of the sacred, since, according to them, philosophy and faith need to be reconciled. Others noted the need for dogmatism to be questioned, by providing conditions for a critical analysis of ancient and modern Arab and Asian philosophies and religious texts (so that religions can be de-dogmatized), as well as of traditions (in analyzing the relationship between freedom and cultural taboos).

Several speakers stressed that the topics treated in the Dialogues need to be related to more universal questions in philosophy, such as: What is the world? What is Man? What is the difference between faith and knowledge? What is the relation between ethics and politics? What is science? How is knowledge created and constructed? How are ethical systems constructed? An analysis of the so-called '*grandes problematiques*' is therefore necessary, namely, as suggested, of the problem of truth, of politics and the State, or of the question of the body, not sufficiently explored particularly in the Arab region.

Almost all of the speakers underscored the need for philosophers to critically respond to contemporary problems relative to the general human condition. For them, the Dialogues need

to adopt a problem-oriented approach with multidisciplinary dimensions, including contributions from various practitioners and decision-makers. Encouraging critical thinking in this context helps the construction and re-construction of active and responsible citizens for a well regulated world order, and particularly, according to some, in view of the progress of modernity and some of its phenomena, such as modern social change and terrorism. Many agreed that there is a particular need to evaluate the theory and practice of democracy, as well as the concepts of justice and human rights, delving particularly into the matter of rights in the face of certain power structures.

### *3) Activities*

Discussing the possible activities of UNESCO in the context of the Dialogues, some stressed the importance of language in the free flow of ideas between the two regions, pointing particularly to the need to promote the translation of works from different languages in the world, while others pointed to the difficulties in translating and communicating philosophical concepts in different languages. With the same concern of disseminating ideas, several philosophers made concrete proposals, such as diffusing ideas through textbooks, journals, manuals, and by preparing a Website for the Arab - Asian philosophers' Dialogue; organizing direct contacts between philosophers from the two regions at least once per year; and encouraging pedagogical activities that focus on the teaching of the philosophy of the other region in secondary and higher education institutions. Some experts underscored the need to move beyond a dialogue strictly between philosophers, stressing the importance of philosophy education to a non-philosophical public, and many agreed on the need for an exchange programme between scholars of the Asian and the Arab region, with some stressing the particular importance of such programmes for female philosophers.

### *4) Methodology*

Discussions agreed on the need to involve in the Dialogues and their activities different stakeholders, such as NGOs, as well as representatives of other disciplines in the humanities.

## **Concluding Remarks for Day 1**

In the conclusion to the initial discussions of Day 1, the ADG distinguished between possible activities for UNESCO in the short and the long term. He asked that the Working Group which was to meet subsequently come up with an action-plan for UNESCO as well as recommendations for topics for an inter-regional conference for the Dialogues. He suggested that the criteria for the topics be the following:

- The topics should make a new contribution to the discipline of philosophy;
- The topics should be problem-oriented, either considering a problem of a contemporary public policy or a concept;
- The topics should be of interest to both regions or tackle a question linking the two regions.

#### 4. 1<sup>st</sup> Working Group Meeting

Members of the Working Group: Prof. Ali Benmakhlouf (Rapporteur), Prof. Joseph Chan (Rapporteur), Prof. Bhuvan Chandel (Rapporteur), Prof. Ghanem Hana (Rapporteur), Prof. Yersu Kim (Chair, President of the Working Group) and Prof. Fathi Triki (Chair).

The aim of the Working Group was to draft an action plan and a list of topics which the Dialogues should address.

The Working Group agreed to recommend the following topics and questions:

Objective I: Historical Comparative: Mutual understanding and learning

- What is the nature of philosophy and philosophizing in the two regions (traditions of thought)?
  - a. Universality
  - b. Religion
  - c. Well-being
  - d. Meaning of life
  - e. Rationality
  - f. Truth
  - g. Identity
- How have these philosophical traditions confronted modernization in the two regions?

Objective II: Problem-oriented: Empowering philosophy in the two regions

- Poverty
- Human rights
- Globalisation
- Gender inequality
- Marginalisation
- Democracy
- Bioethics
- Environmental ethics

The Working Group agreed to the following criteria of selection for Objective II:

- What is of common interest?
- What can be a real philosophical contribution?
- Is the issue problem-oriented?
- Is the issue specific?
- Can the issue of interest be discussed with non-philosophers?

The Working Group agreed to the following suggestions for an Action-Plan:

- Academic research programmes
- Textbook exchange and translation
- (Co-)teaching programmes
- (Co-)publishing
- Language teaching
- Involving Permanent Delegations
- Increasing number of UNESCO Chairs
- Creating databank on philosophy in the two regions

Wednesday, 17 November 2004

## 5. General Discussion

The President of the Working Group, Prof. Kim, presented the recommendations of the Working Group, as elaborated above.

### On Objective I

Prof. Chan, member of the Working Group, explained that Objective I represents a general survey of issues which could interest philosophers in the two regions and contribute to their mutual understanding. A number of participants, however, disagreed with the concepts identified in Objective I. Some did not agree using the concept of 'mutual understanding', which implied that there is an absence of understanding or a misunderstanding between philosophers from the two regions. Instead, one could use the concept of 'common interest'. One participant highlighted the 'Western' nature of the concepts chosen for Objective I. For him concepts that are closer to the Asian and Arab traditions of philosophy need to be examined. In consequence, one should use other criteria to select topics, such as: how is philosophy different in the two regions; what are the most important concepts to the two regions; and how has the West influenced each culture?

Some participants focused on defining 'the nature of philosophy' in the two regions before considering any of the concepts enumerated in Objective I. For some, it concerns the kind of philosophy found in the two regions - its modes and practices. For others, analysing 'the nature of philosophy' in the two regions can be a problematic task, risking to essentialize the concept of philosophy itself.

Several speakers underscored the importance of modernisation and the need for philosophers from the two regions to focus on this issue. For some, modernisation cannot be dissociated from globalisation as an intensified process of modernity, and the pluridimensionality of modernisation must be considered when analysing this phenomenon. It was suggested that instead of "philosophy confronting modernisation", one should rather ask the question: "How can we rethink philosophically the state of present times in the two regions?" One participant disagreed with the use of concepts related to 'confronting modernisation' which assumes a refusal of this process. Instead, one should use the concept 'the problematic of modernisation'. Other participants noted the problematic nature of discussing modernisation, since, for them, it is a concept which refers to the 'Westernisation' of Arab and Asian societies.

Other participants focused on the links between analysing modernisation and the philosophical traditions of the two regions. For some discussants, culture should not be understood restrictively as a cluster of taboos, but should instead be seen as providing directions for particular action. Other disagreed, saying that if one insists on preserving 'traditions', one aborts UNESCO's aim of moving forward. For them, both Asia and the Arab region are spiritual and tolerant, but dogmatism has nevertheless infiltrated. In this regard, the term 'traditions of thought' should not be used, but instead one should speak of 'trends of thought'.

### On Objective II

Discussing the topics suggested under Objective II, some philosophers emphasized that these have a certain political relevance. Participants supported the inclusion of topics such as pluralism, education, secularism, tolerance, solidarity and practical ethics, placing the accent on discussing (or rethinking) human rights, on (the culture of) democracy and on poverty. Others suggested presenting these contemporary problems in a more organised manner, for example, by coupling certain issues, such as human rights and gender, injustice and poverty.

Terrorism was a topic that drew the attention of several participants. For some, this is a topic of interest to both regions, particularly since it is linked to other, more universal philosophical problems, such as fear, apostasy and truth. For others, however, it is more encompassing to treat the hermeneutics of violence and peace. One scholar pointed again to the general problem related to these topics, defining all of them as essentially 'Western'. Philosophers should instead think about an Asian-Arab philosophical agenda, for instance, considering the issue of interdependence instead of globalisation. Concepts discussed in Objective II should be identified on the basis of the criteria of a common interest specific to the two regions, and in terms of the alternative views to philosophical problems that philosophers from these regions could give.

### **On an Action-Plan for UNESCO**

Discussing concrete activities for a UNESCO action-plan for the Dialogues, some experts suggested creating concrete philosophical tools, such as a philosophical dictionary on the philosophy of the two regions. Others suggested facilitating the exchange between philosophers from the two regions, through academic exchange programmes between young professors, researchers and students, or a scholarships programme which would transfer resources from rich to poor Arab and Asian states. Others suggested awareness-raising activities for each philosophical tradition in each of the regions. Almost all participants agreed on the organisation of annual conferences, proposing that their outcomes are published and integrated into textbooks.

On the basis of the suggestions of the Working Group and of these discussions, the ADG suggested a short-term action-plan for UNESCO.

With regard to Objective I:

- A literature review would be commissioned on the themes suggested;
- Several research centres / institutes in the two regions would be subsequently identified and research commissioned with them on the suggested themes;
- This research would be published, for instance in the format of a philosophy dictionary.

As regards Objective II:

- One or two themes will be chosen at the second meeting of the Working Group as possible themes for an inter-regional conference, to take place in 2005. On the basis of the papers and discussions, the ADG judged that there was near unanimity for the topics of poverty and social justice, and culture of democracy, whereas participants had differences on the themes of modernisation, and terrorism and violence;
- Research proposals on the topic chosen will be called for, if possible from teams of one Arab and one Asian philosopher;
- Papers will be selected for the conference;
- The papers will be published after the conference and used as teaching material.

## 6. 2<sup>nd</sup> Working Group Meeting

Present in this meeting were: Prof. Ali Benmakhlouf (Rapporteur), Prof. Joseph Chan (Rapporteur), Prof. Bhuvan Chandel (Rapporteur), Prof. Fatma Haddad-Chamakh, Prof. Ghanem Hana (Rapporteur) and Prof. Yersu Kim (President of the Working Group, Chair).

The aim of the meeting was to suggest three to four topics to the plenary for the upcoming conference envisaged for 2005 (Objective II).

Although members disagreed on whether they had the right to impose specific topics, after discussions regarding the common topics of interest of the philosophers present in the plenary meeting and their relevance to the two regions, the Working Group agreed on the following themes for the 2005 conference, in order of preference:

1. Democracy in Asia and the Arab World: Philosophical Approaches
2. Poverty and Social Justice in Asia and the Arab World
3. Modernisation
4. Terrorism and Violence

## 7. Conclusions and Follow-up

After discussion by the participants on the specificities and adequacy of the topics suggested, the ADG stressed that the purpose of the dialogues is to reflect the perspectives of philosophers in both Asia and the Arab region. The ADG thanked the participants to this brainstorming meeting for their contributions, and made the following conclusions for its follow-up:

1. In 2005:
  - a. An inter-regional conference will take place at the end of 2005 on a theme deriving from the first two topics suggested by the Working Group, namely on the topic “*Democracy and Social Justice in Asia and the Arab World*”;
  - b. A call for papers will be launched in Universities and Institutes in Asia and the Arab region in preparation for this conference. The call for papers will be for contributions on a specific sub-theme, if possible to be prepared jointly by a team of philosophers from Asia and the Arab world.
2. A proposal for a 6-year programme for the Inter-regional Philosophical Dialogues will be elaborated by UNESCO, on the basis of the written contributions of participants (which can be revised and resent to UNESCO if necessary) and of the discussions during this meeting.

## ANNEX I: Programme

### **16 November, 2004**

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*10.00 a.m. – 10.30 a.m.*

Welcoming Remarks by Mr Pierre Sané,  
Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences,  
Welcoming Remarks by H. E. Mrs Samira Hanna-El-Daher,  
Vice-President of the Arab Group at UNESCO,  
Introduction of the working method of the meeting, by Mr Pierre Sané: nomination of the  
Presidents, Rapporteurs and the Working Group

*10.30 a.m. – 11.15 a.m.*

Presentations by  
Prof. Yersu Kim,  
Former Secretary-General, National Commission of the Republic of Korea for UNESCO  
Prof. Fathi Triki,  
UNESCO Philosophy Chair in Tunisia

*11.15 a.m. – 1.00 p.m.*

Dialogue Between Asia and the Arab World: Aims and Challenges  
Discussions

*1.00 p.m. – 3.00 p.m.*

Lunch (Bus to Restaurant Fontenoy)

*3.00 p.m. – 5.00 p.m.*

Discussions (cont'd)

*5.00 p.m. – 6.00 p.m.*

1<sup>st</sup> Closed Meeting of the Working Group

### **17 November, 2004**

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*10.00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.*

Recommendations for an action-plan for the Inter-Regional Dialogues  
Discussions

*3.00 p.m. – 5.00 p.m.*

2<sup>nd</sup> Closed Meeting of the Working Group

*5.00 p.m. – 6.00 p.m.*

Closing session:  
Presentations of the Recommendations  
Closing Remarks by Mr Pierre Sané, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences

**18 November, 2004**  
**on the Occasion of the Philosophy Day at UNESCO**

UNESCO Paris Headquarters,  
125 Avenue de Suffren, 75007 Paris  
7 place Fontenoy, 75007 Paris

Room IV

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*3.00 p.m. – 5.30 p.m.*

Public Conference on the Occasion of the Philosophy Day at UNESCO

Chaired by Mr Pierre Sané, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences

**List of Speakers:**

Prof. Mona Abousenna  
Prof. Fatma Haddad-Chamakh  
Prof. Tomonobu Imamichi  
Prof. Ram Adhar Mall

## ANNEX II: List of participants

### **Algeria**

1. Mohammed ARKOUN

### **Bangladesh**

2. Golam DASTAGIR

### **China**

3. Joseph C.W. CHAN

### **Egypt**

4. Mona ABOUSENA
5. Hassan HANAFI
6. Mourad WAHBA

### **India**

7. Bhuvan CHANDEL

### **Islamic Republic of Iran**

8. Abdolkarim SOROUSH

### **Japan**

9. Tomonobu IMAMICHI
10. Naoshi YAMAWAKI

### **Kazakhstan**

11. Beket NURZHANOV

### **Lebanon**

12. Bashshar HAYDAR
13. Nassif NASSAR

### **Mongolia**

14. Danzankhorloo DASHPUREV

### **Morocco**

15. Ali BENMAKHOUF
16. Bensalem HIMMICH
17. Mohamed Mustapha LAARISSA
18. Mohamed MESBAHI

### **Republic of Korea**

19. In-Suk CHA
20. Heisook KIM

21. Yersu KIM
22. Hong-bin LIM

**Syrian Arab Republic**

23. Ghanem HANA

**Tunisia**

24. Mokdad ARFA
25. Fatma HADDAD-CHAMAKH
26. Fathi TRIKI

**Other experts**

27. Ram Adhar MALL
28. TU Weiming

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**Other participants**

29. H. E. Mrs Samira Hanna-El-Daher, Vice-President of the Arab Group at UNESCO

**UNESCO**

30. Pierre SANÉ, Assistant Director-General for Social and Human Sciences
31. Moufida GOUCHA, Chief of Section of Philosophy and Human Sciences
32. Maya MAKHLOUF, Executive Office, Sector for Social and Human Sciences
33. Mika SHINO, Programme Specialist, Section of Philosophy and Human Sciences
34. Kristina BALALOVSKA, Section of Philosophy and Human Sciences

## ANNEX III: List of special roles

### 1. Chairs

- a. Yersu KIM (Republic of Korea)
- b. Fathi TRIKI (Tunisia)

### 2. Rapporteurs

- a. Ali BENMAKHLOUF (Morocco)
- b. Joseph C.W. CHAN (China)
- c. Bhuvan CHANDEL (India)
- d. Ghanem HANA (Syria)

### 3. Working Group

- a. Ali BENMAKHLOUF (Morocco)
- b. Joseph C.W. CHAN (China)
- c. Bhuvan CHANDEL (India)
- d. Ghanem HANA (Syria)
- e. Yersu KIM (Republic of Korea)
- f. Fathi TRIKI (Tunisia)

## ANNEX IV: Proposals from Asian Philosophers for a UNESCO Action-Plan

- Exchanging young scholars and lecturers from the two regions, with a particular accent on women;
- Publishing journals, anthologies and monographs;
- Conducting studies examining the relationship between philosophy and society in the two regions;
- Revising school curricula with the aim of promoting inter-regional understanding, such as the inclusion of teaching of Arabic ways of thought in Asian universities and of Asian thought in Arabic universities;
- Encouraging comparative studies of the two regions;
- Establishing a UNESCO Center for Global Studies, where such issues as peace, human rights, democracy could be studied;
- Creating a world databank for philosophy;
- Establishing an international network of philosophical societies;
- Establishing more UNESCO Philosophy Chairs;
- Promoting closer cooperation between institutions in philosophy and human sciences;
- Encouraging the involvement of Embassies and their cultural departments in philosophy programmes;
- Organizing seminars or symposia to work out plans, programs, and methodologies for dialogue;
- Organizing fora to foster cross-cultural ethical dialogue;
- Declaring a World Philosophy Day;
- Developing a programme of the co-editing and co-teaching of classical texts from both the Asian and the Arab traditions;
- Establishing a standing colloquium of Arab philosophy in Asian countries and vice-versa which would concentrate on getting acquainted with classical texts;
- Promoting the study of Arabic and of so-called 'nomadic philosophy'.