

Department of Philosophy
University of Western Ontario

Philosophy 154E.001 'Asian Philosophies'

Fall and Winter, 2003-2004

On philosophical method and Eastern Philosophy

Philosophical skills to develop:

- (1) The ability to critically read your sources,
- (2) the ability to develop good arguments for the position you espouse, and
- (3) the ability to be open to critical self-evaluation.

Remember the best philosophy is painful philosophy. That is to say, when your philosophical reflection is adversely affecting your various comfort zones, then you are doing philosophy proper. Good philosophy requires both **sincerity**, in approaching the areas of study critically AND fairly, and a **degree of authenticity**, in approaching areas close to you with a (fair) degree of critical analysis.

Studying Eastern Philosophy:

Avoid being gullible (commonly referred to as 'being flakey') **or dismissive**. Neither of these attitudes are optimal for doing philosophy. If we can imagine these two attitudes to be at opposite end points of a spectrum of possible attitudes, then we should see the optimal approach as somewhere in between. Let me christen this approach, **the reflectively critical approach**.

Topics covered in Eastern Philosophy:

The topics covered under the rubric of Eastern philosophy largely resemble those encountered in Western philosophy. It is customary to divide Western philosophy into three basic areas of study, and this fits as well in the Eastern sphere of philosophy as in the West.

First we find an area known as **Epistemology**. The term comes from two Greek words, *episteme* or knowledge and *logos* or word, theory or account. **Epistemology is the theory of knowledge**. Eastern philosophers differ significantly from their Western counterparts on the issue of common sources of knowledge. A great many Hindu, Jain, Buddhist, Taoist and Neo-Confucian philosophers advocate using various meditation techniques to acquire knowledge about Reality. **Indeed for these philosophers ultimate knowledge about Reality can be had only through certain kinds of meditation.**

The second area of philosophical inquiry has become known as **Metaphysics**. **Metaphysics concerns questions about the nature of Reality, or various elements of Reality**. This is importantly different from epistemology in that it asks questions about what must be the case about Reality to best explain our knowledge of it.

The third and final area of philosophical inquiry concerns **Value Theory**. **In many ways this area of philosophical inquiry can be subsumed under either Epistemology or Metaphysics**. Questions like 'Do we have moral knowledge?', 'What is the good?', and 'Are there moral facts or truths?' belong to this category of inquiry and are also good examples of either epistemic or metaphysical questions, respectively. As we will see throughout the course, concerns about right action and moral character motivate much Eastern philosophy.

Questions to ask yourself as we move through the course material:

Here are some questions you might ask yourself: 'What is knowledge?', 'What is a rational belief about x (where x is a particular area of interest)?', 'Is meditation a legitimate source of knowledge?', 'How do we decide what is a legitimate source of knowledge?', 'What is the nature of Reality?', 'Am I real?', 'Do I have

a soul?', 'Will I be reborn when I die?', 'What is it to be good or live a good life?', and 'What are my moral duties?'

You will find the philosophers in our readings giving various, incompatible answers to these questions ... so you can't agree with them all!

A cautionary note:

Take care in critically evaluating such issues as whether we have a soul or whether meditation is a legitimate source of knowledge.

The view that we have a soul does not easily cohere with what we now know of the brain and the (so-called) 'inner workings' of our minds. In particular, embodied experience and our physiological health seem to have profound effects on the contents of our minds and our overall personalities. These observations about our minds (broadly construed) are difficult to explain if we have a soul which somehow exists prior to, or otherwise independent of, our brains/bodies. (As you will see, Buddhist philosophers deny the existence of souls.)

At least on the face of it, meditation is no more an unreliable source of knowledge than introspection or memory. If we view introspection or memory as legitimate sources of knowledge, we need to ask ourselves 'Why?'. So, if you do view memory as a legitimate source of knowledge, why? (Also, if you do not, why not?) Your answers to these questions may yield a clue as to where your view about the epistemic value of meditation lies. If you believe that meditation is a legitimate source of knowledge, you need to inquire after the grounds or reasons for such a belief. (The same is true if you deny that meditation is a legitimate source of knowledge.) **What you want to avoid is a view of knowledge that lets too much in** (e.g. clearly false or irrational beliefs [like 'The earth is flat']) **or leaves too much out** (e.g. highly probable beliefs [like 'The earth is extremely old']).

Even if you discover good reasons for holding that meditation is a legitimate source of knowledge, this tells you nothing yet about what knowledge can be gained through meditation. Indeed, we need to first discern which meditation techniques are optimal for acquiring knowledge (different Eastern traditions emphasize different techniques). Then we need to inquire after what knowledge can be gained through meditation.

Andrew Fenton, instructor.