

WHERE THE BUTTERFLY MEETS THE MOTH

An interview with Graham Parkes

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COLLEEN FITZPATRICK: Much of your research takes a comparative approach to Continental European and East-Asian thought, including the philosophy of art. You have said that philosophy as practiced in Europe and the United States tends to be rather parochial, and one of your concerns has been to open people's minds to the benefits of a comparative approach. What are the benefits of this 'hermeneutic distance', as you have termed it, and how has this approach enhanced your life and work?

GRAHAM PARKES: The benefit of hermeneutic distance, which can be gained by engaging philosophy from a different tradition, is that it gives you a new perspective on your own philosophical tradition, one that allows you to see the tacit assumptions and presuppositions that implicitly inform your ways of thinking. Beyond that, it's always refreshing to investigate philosophies where the important questions are different from our own, and where questions that we think are important might not even arise.

CF: You have translated and interpreted many Japanese philosophical texts over the years and similarly opened up the western academic

tradition to comparative studies of both Nietzsche and Heidegger in relation to Chinese Daoism and Japanese Zen. Do you think that comparative studies help us to understand the differences and similarities between human beings around the world?

GP: I suppose the greatest difference between our traditions and those of East-Asia is that in classical Chinese and Japanese philosophy there's no notion of a transcendent realm, or of a creator apart from creation. Another difference is that whereas the ancient Greeks wanted to know 'What is truth?' the ancient Chinese tended to ask 'What is the way (to live)?' But at the same time there are commonalities, such as a mistrust of personal profit or fame as sensible motivations for our actions.

CF: You have a chapter entitled 'Body-Mind and Buddha-Nature: Dōgen's Deeper Ecology' in *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy: Classical Japanese Philosophy*.¹ Does the approach to the body-mind problem vary around the world?

GP: Well, the mind-body problem is one of those interesting cases where there really isn't a counterpart in East Asian philosophy. Since they never had an Orphic-Pythagorean tradition of separating soul and body, or a Cartesian tradition of separating mind and matter, the mind-body split simply wasn't a problem. Of course they distinguish the more physical from the more psychological aspects of a person, but as distinct perspectives rather than different substances.

CF: I would have thought that art would be more of an intellectual practice in Western culture, where we have become alienated from the embodied aspects of art; however, in your entry on Japanese aesthetics in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy you state that culture and the arts in Japan tend to be more closely linked to the intellect than in Western traditions.² This surprises me, as the East has brought us

¹Parkes 2010.

²Parkes 2011.

things like yoga and breath work, which is intended to bring us back to our bodies.

GP: I didn't mean to suggest in the SEP article that East Asian traditions are more intellectual than Western, but rather that 'the life of the mind' is always more intimately connected with the body, and with physical practice, than in the western traditions. If I may refer to something I wrote recently about this issue, the consistently heavy Asian emphasis on the physical practices underlying and informing philosophical thinking is something that one rarely finds in Western philosophy.³

CF: Wentworth has discussed how painting becomes an "intellectual curiosity" through over-analysis by art historians, which destroys the phenomenon being studied.⁴ Is this a specifically Western issue?

GP: Yes, I suppose there's little interest in abstract analysis in traditional Chinese and Japanese philosophy, or in intellectualizing that doesn't have practical application.

CF: Crowther's *Ecological Theory of Art* begins with the notion of embodiment, where art is the 'practice' that serves 'ontological reciprocity' in a way that philosophy cannot.⁵ We might say that 'ontological reciprocity'⁶ is reflected in Eastern philosophy, where all things are seen as interdependent parts of a cosmic whole.⁷ What's your opinion here?

GP: An ecological approach to art sounds great to me, and the importance of embodiment and practice have been largely overlooked until recently. And yes, the helpful idea of the world as a dynamic web of

³Parkes 2012.

⁴Wentworth 2004.

⁵Crowther 1997.

⁶Ibid., p. 1.

⁷Capra 1992.

interrelations is germane to the Chinese and Japanese traditions, both in Daoism and in Buddhism.

CF: It could be thought that because art is a sensuous bodily activity, which expands our view of the world, there are correlations between art and Eastern practices such as Buddhist ‘mindfulness’, meditation, and yoga. Do you have a stance on this?

GP: Yes, because of the influence of Chinese Daoism and Japanese Buddhism on East Asian art practices, many of them involve forms of mindfulness. And yes, they tend to be more intimately connected with the body than in the Western traditions, insofar as they require long periods of practice during which one pays careful attention to one’s movements.

CF: Do you think that painting as an art is viewed differently in Eastern cultures compared with ours, as it is closely aligned to the body? Where do you see the future of painting in our culture?

GP: Since East Asian traditions don’t separate philosophy from religion, or art from craft, or ritual from daily behaviour in the way we tend to do, there’s always been a strong sense of practising the arts as ways of life. As far as painting and the body are concerned, despite the differences between East Asian traditions and ours, I’m always amazed at how aptly Merleau-Ponty’s ideas (especially in his essay ‘Eye and Mind’) apply to Chinese and Japanese practices. Perhaps that’s a reason to hope that painting that’s practised at a deep philosophical level might survive the ravages of postmodern trends.

CF: I know that you’re also interested in environmental philosophy; your chapters ‘Winds, Waters, and Earth-Energies: Fengshui and Sense of Place’ and ‘Mountain Brushes, Ink of Oceans: Nature as Sacred in Japanese Buddhism’ are so rich in natural imagery that one could confuse the titles alone for poetry.⁸ Reading ‘The Role of Rock

⁸Parkes 2003b; Parkes 2003a.

in the Japanese Dry Landscape Garden,' one has the impression that 'garden art' is an important part of Japanese and Chinese aesthetics.⁹ Even in India, flower arrangements form the fabric of both ceremonies and everyday life. Was your interest in the environment influenced by what you came across in Asian gardens, or are the two areas of study mutually exclusive?

GP: I suppose my interests in the arts and in the natural world developed in parallel. I sometimes feel a bit guilty writing about the fine arts when I feel that I should be trying to save the planet by writing about environmental issues instead. But of course the aesthetics of the natural world are a fascinating topic, and one to which East Asian traditions have devoted a great deal of thought. This is why Chinese and Japanese gardens are especially interesting, since the aesthetics utilized apply to both natural and human-made beauty. As for 'Mountain Brushes, Ink of Oceans,' I still like the title but would no longer recommend the article, which has been superseded by the more prosaically named 'Kūkai and Dōgen as Exemplars of Ecological Engagement.'¹⁰

CF: The traditional concept of 'sabi' in Japanese is quite beautiful—referring to increased age being part of the beauty of an object. Do you think that modern Japan is actually quite westernized and removed from traditional aesthetics? We often think of busy places like Tokyo when we think of Japan, not of the kind of aesthetic you've described in your writings.

GP: Well, yes, unfortunately the modern Japanese city is rather ugly in comparison to its counterparts in Europe, or even America. There's some outstanding contemporary architecture here and there, but mostly (thanks to the devastation of the country during the Pacific War) it's a wasteland. But there are pockets of traditional (often zen-inspired) beauty to be found all over Japan, so the old style aesthetics still persists.

⁹Parkes 2000.

¹⁰Parkes 2013.

CF: What has your research, which spans diverse cultures, led you to conclude about the purpose of art in the lives of human beings? How would you answer the question, 'what is art for?' and is there global parity to the question, in your opinion?

GP: I've always liked Nietzsche's idea that art is a stimulus to life: in a world without much in the way of intrinsic meaning, the existence of fine works of art gives you a reason to get up in the morning. And since we seem hell-bent on destroying the beauties of the natural world (which are another reason, at least for me, to get up in the morning), art provides a stimulus that is all the more important.

This is also related to Nietzsche's idea of aesthetic existence, of making one's life a work of art, by perceiving and experiencing creatively in addition to engaging in practices that imbue one's behaviour with style and grace. This corresponds well to the East Asian idea of the arts as ways of life.

CF: Could we talk about the word 'aesthetic'? Do you believe there is such a thing as 'aesthetic interest' that all human beings share?

GP: To start with, the etymology of the word 'aesthetic' has to do with sense perception. There has long been an aesthetics of the fine arts, but there is also an aesthetics in the West, more recently, of nature. In East Asian traditions they didn't have a word for aesthetics: the Chinese and Japanese use the term 'the study of beauty'. One positive development in aesthetics in recent years is the broadening of the term, so that so that we are talking not only about our reactions to works of fine art but also to nature, and about an aesthetics of everyday life. That would have a parallel in East Asian traditions, I suppose, from the side of Zen Buddhism, which encourages you to look at everything in a new way, and not to make this distinction we make in the west between the beautiful and the ugly, where we judge only the former to be worthy of our attention.

If you look at Greek philosophy, especially Plato, the notion of the Good is very much connected with beauty, and you have a similar

thing in ancient Chinese philosophy, where the same character is actually used to mean both beautiful and good. Nowadays we have an aesthetic of the ugly and the horrendous, and for me this is a positive move for the arts, since it expands their sphere beyond the production of works of beauty. There is a lot of great art that is unsettling, and which wouldn't be considered beautiful in any traditional sense.

I would like to say, however, that in the postmodern era many people want to forget about anything to do with beauty. I suppose I'm old fashioned, but I still retain a soft spot for beauty. If you take that democratising movement toward 'de-skilling', for example, where the artist doesn't need to acquire any particular skills, the result, as far as I'm concerned, is a lot of ugly art that isn't at all interesting, because it hasn't been sufficiently crafted or thought through. With respect to Nietzsche's notion of the function of the arts, that stuff is hardly (at least for me) a stimulus to life, or something that enhances our existence.

CF: So on one hand you say that you welcome art being broadened to encompass lots of different things, but on the other hand if it all becomes ugly and too much of an intellectual thing then that's not necessarily a good thing either.

GP: Right. There's a great deal of conceptual art, some of which was revolutionary and interesting at the beginning, which has now become very tedious. I often wonder 'Why bother going to see or hear that stuff?' when I could just stay at home and read about it.

CF: On the subject of beauty, we do have this problem of subjectivity. Do you believe that there is any agreement on what is beautiful? Through your experience of different cultures, would you say that we all see things differently? Or is there a common standard?

GP: I don't think I do have a particular stance, since I studiously avoid writing about beauty. But in answer to your question, I think it's clear that there aren't any universal standards, or at least there are very

few. We might find some kind of harmony is valued in most cultures, but then there are different understandings of what harmony is. East Asian art goes in for emptiness and silence, and doesn't have much interest in symmetry, by comparison with our own traditions.

However, that's not to say that there are no 'orders of rank,' or standards by which we can judge works of art. We can say, for example, that in the context of the tradition of Western sculpture Rodin is a master. On what basis? Well, in any tradition that hasn't completely lost its way there are acknowledged experts, people who have spent their time studying works of art and evaluating them—art historians, curators, critics, aestheticians—and a fair degree of consensus tends to emerge over the long term. I don't have much time for those who dismiss all that expertise (which of course is always open to question) and say it's all 'subjective.'

CF: So are you saying that art can be judged in its own tradition against a historical and contemporary context, so that we might not learn as much by trying to compare a Western sculpture to an Asian work of art, while within traditions you can say 'this is a good example of *X*'?

GP: Right. It takes some work, but I think that within particular traditions you can find good grounds for saying that this work, or artist, is great, and this one is mediocre. I'm not sure, though, that this is possible across traditions—but it may not be desirable anyway.

Of course over time what is considered great can, and does, change: we might find that neglected works have been underestimated, and formerly revered works have been overrated. But for me it's an existential question: there isn't much time left, so what am I going to choose to read, or listen to, or look at? (Even if you're young, there's still not much time relative to the possibilities out there.) I'm not even going to have the time to experience all the Western art that I know I could enjoy—and then there's the whole of East Asia and the rest of the world's great art! So for me it comes down a question of what, realistically, we as finite beings are going to focus our attention

on, given that we have access to a vaster range of art works than any previous generation.

CF: Maybe we almost have too much access to too many things, so that we get glimpses of everything. To enjoy a work of art don't we really need to spend time with it?

GP: Absolutely. A good work of art takes *time* to become familiar with and to appreciate. Once I get into them, I find myself returning to the same books, or paintings, or pieces of music again and again.

CF: Do you have any advice regarding methodology and approaches for research in comparative philosophy of art? Are comparisons enough, or should we endeavour to develop our own traditions based on what we learn from others?

GP: I think maybe you're right. There is a place for 'comparative' research, but we should be going further, looking at what art and aesthetics actually are in different cultures, and trying to discern and appreciate the parallels and the divergences. And where they diverge, it's interesting to ask about the cultural, political, and historical reasons for this divergence. And then we can ask the question from each side: what do we learn if we come to understand why, say, the Chinese think such-and-such a work is beautiful? And can we learn anything from applying Chinese aesthetic standards to a work from our own tradition? So perhaps a better term would be 'cross-cultural,' because you're doing more than just comparing.

CF: When we look at these cross-cultural issues and come up with answers as to why and how our cultures are different, what do we gain? Do we learn more about human nature, for instance?

GP: Yes, I think we do, because after all we presume we know what human beings are on the basis of an extremely small sample—sometimes from a sample of one! So it's always helpful to look

at another culture, to go to another culture and try to immerse ourselves in those other perspectives. It's always a learning experience: if I can't understand why such-and-such an art form is so prominent in China or Japan, perhaps there's something lacking in me, maybe. And if I can come to understand it, my life might be enriched by that understanding.

CF: Does all this make us better people? Is that even what it's about?

GP: I absolutely think it does, because what makes us worse is parochialism, ethnocentrism. For me anything that opens us up a bit and extends our network of relations is always a good thing.

CF: Sometimes I wonder if in philosophy, after we make all these enquiries to be better people, to live in a better world, we then lose sight of that. Philosophy can get lost in the detail. Is Western philosophy practical enough?

GP: That's a very good point. I think of Pierre Hadot's book, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, where he shows that philosophy as a way of life was at the basis of the western tradition, but then for the most part, through an 'ascent to theory', lost its connection with real life.¹¹ Though I'm no stranger to the joys of purely intellectual enquiry, the world is in poor shape these days, and I think philosophy has a responsibility to try to make a difference. Since the East Asian traditions they never had Platonism or Christianity, their philosophy has always been rooted in practice, and that has had a significant impact on the way they look at aesthetics and art. Philosophy doesn't do itself (or the rest of the world) a favour by retreating into a citadel of pure theory.

¹¹Hadot 1995.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE: A native of Glasgow, Graham Parkes taught Asian and comparative philosophy at the University of Hawaii for thirty years before moving to Cork, in Ireland, in July 2008. His research interests are intercultural philosophy (Continental European and East-Asian), environmental philosophy, and philosophies of art and film.

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