

What are the major differences between Eastern and Western philosophies?

15 ANSWERS



Deepankar Pal, Student

Written Sep 28, 2013

In the following answer, by Eastern Philosophy I am mainly considering the Six Schools of Indian Philosophy

Broadly the difference are:

- Western Philosophy follows a vertical development, it can be understood as the teachings of Plato, Socrates, Epicurus, Aristotle led to Rationalist and Empiricist Philosophers, Kant unified up to some extent these two thoughts. Kant's idea were then further used by other philosophers.
- Eastern Philosophy follows a parallel horizontal development, various schools of philosophy developed Independent from each other, each complete in its own respect. For example Buddhism, Jainism, Sankhya, Yoga school of thoughts are in themselves quite developed and are different from each other.
- The Western Philosophy is intellectual curiosity about Epistemology or Metaphysical aspects. On the other hand the main aim of Eastern Philosophy is liberation of the individual, end to his suffering or Nirvana. All schools of Eastern Philosophy except Charvaka give special emphasis to liberation, and all the main propounders of Eastern Philosophy achieved liberation in their own way, be it Buddha, Mahavira, Shankaracharya. Contrary to this no western philosopher can really claim to have achieved liberation.
- Western philosophy was originally practiced in a very similar way. "Know thyself" was inscribed on the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in ancient Greece. Practiced famously by Socrates, philosophy was engaged as a sort of care of the self, or an investigation into the way the self and world exist. The philosophies of the Stoics, the Epicureans, the Sceptics, and Boethius were avowedly therapeutic. But after the 18th century, philosophy became more and more academicized; it was removed from practical, personal and transformational use. Western philosophy's goal became to discover the grounds of scientific truth and the limits of man's ability to know it.

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Sam Shih, Studied Eastern philosophy and lived in multiple monasteries in East Asia

Updated Sep 3

Peace vs. Harmony

“In America, people keep arguing for rights, but what we need is consideration.”

At the Zen temple I stayed at, I discussed with the head monk how Eastern thinking influenced interpersonal interactions in Asia. “In the past, there was no word for peace 平和 in Japanese, there was only harmony 調和. In the West when we talk about peace, somebody is always giving peace to somebody else, sometimes even forcing it onto them. It is uneven. **But in harmony, there is coexistence.**”

He described harmony like crossing your hands together. “There is nothing forced on anybody. For example, we live together with nature in harmony. Where my hands cross is where we understand each other. But while there may be some things that we might not see eye to eye on, where our arms don’t touch, some things I don’t understand about you, I don’t mind. I just accept it.”



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Sankara Saranam, studied at Philosophy

Written Jun 23, 2014

For the sake of avoiding to write a book on it, we can point to one or perhaps even the major difference. OF course, even saying that allows for the artificial distinction.

Eastern thought is eventually ontological. It doesn't really stop until it makes a stab at what's really real. It loves the general knowledge.

Western thought is highly dissecting. It doesn't not mind engaging the variety and leave alone the promise of an absolute unity. It loves the specificity of knowledge.

All other differences follow from that. And this difference, I have theorized, may be based on the yuga model and the relative venerability of eastern thought.

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Ryan Cook, I think, therefore I consult Quora

Written Aug 31

If I may, I'd like to quote David Gilmour, the legendary guitarist from Pink Floyd:

There are no answers here, when you look out you don't see in
There was no promise made, the part you've played, the chance you took
There's no way out of here, when you come in you're in for good

And never was there an answer, there an answer
Not without listening, without seeing

These lyrics are from the song *There's No Way Out Of Here*. To me it perfectly describes the Eastern approach of searching for truth internally, through direct experience. Western philosophers turn to the outside world to find truth.

Both approaches are perfectly valid and lead to different insights.

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Joseph Wang, Chief Scientist, Bitquant Research

Written Apr 24, 2013

Originally Answered: What are the fundamental differences between Western philosophy and Eastern philosophy?

Western philosophy happened in the West. Eastern philosophy happened in the East

That's it.

One problem with defining thing in other terms is that people will come up with a "stereotype" of what Eastern philosophy is, and then define Eastern philosophy in terms of that stereotype. For example, Mao Zedong, came from China, but people consider "Maoism" to be "Western", unless you start talking about "Western democracy" at which point Maoism suddenly becomes Eastern again.

Just to give examples of how philosophies in China break the stereotypes..

- 1) Formal systems - Mohism was a very big fan of formal systems. So is evidential Confucianism
- 2) Platonic reality - The whole *point* of Buddhism is that there is this platonic reality out there and are daily experiences are illusion
- 3) Empiricism - Evidential Confucianism and Han learning is very big on Empircism

One problem in trying to define things into East and West is that people then assume that "eastern philosophies" are similar and so are "western" philosophies. In fact this is often not the case, evidential Confucianism is highly *anti-Buddhist*.

Something that is odd is that you sometimes find seemingly wildly different philosophies in the same room. For example, my philosophy is based on evidential Confucianism, which pushed me into astrophysics, and I find myself in the some room in the astronomy department with Catholic priests and orthodox and secular Jews.

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Paul Bush, PhD computational neuroscience. Nonmaterialist.

Written Mar 18, 2016

There are probably exceptions to any statements about this, but the major difference is that Western philosophies (WP) are dualistic and thus materialistic while Eastern (EP) are not. By "dualistic" I am not referring to the mind/body dualism of Descartes but the identification with a mind/body and consequent disidentification with the rest of reality. This leads a number of false beliefs and in the end is responsible for all suffering. Beliefs such as "I am a person. Matter is real, only* matter is real and it exists independently of me".

The mystical core of religion forms the basis of EP, whereas religion and philosophy became increasingly divorced in the west. This may seem to be due to the rise of science and rational thinking, but the scientific approach itself arose from dualism, the belief in a self, independent of the world, acting on it and mastering it in order to put it to use. Science arose from the same perspective that reduced religion to a paternalistic God, a sky-daddy with a human personality, ever separate from but always lording over his helpless subjects. Such a perspective leads to philosophies that agonize over questions of meaning and direction, left with only rational analysis to apply to questions such as free will and morality, so getting nowhere and unable to fulfill their purpose. In EP these questions don't arise; if you view yourself as not different from the world there is no difference between acting for yourself and acting for everyone.

The western approach is not all bad of course. It's better not to be sitting in a mud shack dying of disease. But now that the internet is removing the distinction between east and west it's time to take the best of both EP and WP, recognizing that yes, we can make our material life comfortable, but that isn't the purpose of life and to believe that it is will only lead to suffering.

*More recently Einstein showed the unity of matter and energy, which is problematic for materialism since energy is hard to define, having to do with the transformation of matter.

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Vinod Khare, studied at Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur

Written Apr 24, 2013

Originally Answered: What are the fundamental differences between Western philosophy and Eastern philosophy?

I've been researching this for two days now and it is hard to fathom all the differences give the long history of philosophy in the East and the West, the many schools of philosophy practiced in both regions and the difficulty in defining 'eastern' and 'western'. However, I'd like to list a few differences that a couple of days of research have revealed.

Formal Systems

Western philosophy took an early liking to formal systems. A formal system is a mathematical model for reality. It starts with symbols, their properties (axioms), and rules to manipulate them. Euclid's geometry is an early example of a formal system. While eastern thinkers did study math and

geometry, they did not tie it up to a formalism which made generalization difficult. For example, Vedic mathematics gives different rules (or tricks) for multiplying different categories of numbers (ending in 5s, ending in 9s etc.) while western math is happy with one generic rule.

Platonic Reality

The idea of platonic reality has always been prominent in western philosophy. That is, symbols have a life of their own and are worthy of study devoid of any relation to reality. Indian math and science has always been linked to practical problems. For example, early sanskrit geometry is concerned with the construction of vedic altars etc. while Euclid had no such concerns.

Empericism

Empericism has been more popular in the west. Empericism is the idea that the only "truth" is sensory perception. Eastern philosophy has been more accepting of other modes of knowing.

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Shahin Khan, works at Jahangirnagar University

Written Apr 22, 2014

Fragmentary vs. Holistic

"According to Fritjof Capra, the emphasis of rational thought is epitomised in Descartes' celebrated statement, 'Cognito, ergo sum' - 'I think, therefore, I exist.' This has forcefully encouraged Westerners to equate their identity with their rational mind rather than with the whole organism. This division between the mind and the body has led to a view of the universe as a mechanical system consisting of separate objects, which in turn were reduced to fundamental building blocks whose properties and interactions were thought to completely determine all natural phenomena.

This mechanistic conception of the whole world is still the basis of most of our sciences and continues to have a tremendous influence on our lives. Academic disciplines become fragmented and this has served as a rationale for treating the universe as if it consisted of separate parts to be exploited by different groups."

In western philosophy, we like to emphasize the importance of parts of a whole rather than the whole. We see things like the mind and the body as two separate parts with separate identities, rather than viewing them as two equal but opposing parts that form a greater whole. This mentality can be found daily in American society, be it in politics, religion, or even race relations.

Eastern philosophy, on the other hand, emphasizes the whole. That's one of the reasons Chinese and Indian sages never differentiated between religion and philosophy or categorized their philosophies into branches. All of their teachings were not meant to be taken as separate truths, but as parts that would eventually lead to the revelation of the one Truth:

"The essence of the Eastern world view is the awareness of the unity and the mutual inter-relation of all things and events, the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestation of a basic oneness. All things are seen as independent and inseparable parts of a cosmic whole, as different

manifestations of the same ultimate reality. The Eastern traditions refer to this ultimate, indivisible reality as Brahman in Hinduism, Dharmakaya in Buddhism and Tao in Taoism."

The different conceptions of the Creator or the creative energy reflect the division between eastern and western philosophy well. Remember that while we separate philosophy and religion in the west, the two go hand in hand in most eastern traditions.

In the west, there is God. According to your religion, you worship God in a certain way and live your life a certain way. The Abrahamic God is worshipped by most of the world's population. This God is a "he" and he feels the same kind of emotions that man does: anger, jealousy, happiness, love, etc. This God is supernatural and can bend the laws of nature at his will. Ironically, although man is said to have been created by God, and though it is said that everything God creates is good, man is seen as dirty, sinful, evil, and unworthy of God's love. Men must work to earn the love of their God, be it by worshipping his one begotten son, by praying to him five times daily and making a pilgrimage to Mecca, by getting circumcised, or some other act of devotion.

Western religion focuses on the exoteric (outer) aspects of religious traditions, and it focuses on the fragments that make up the religion (your religion, your denomination, what church you go to, what foods you eat, which scriptures you read, etc.). Western philosophy focuses on the parts rather than the whole.

Contrasting this idea is the eastern perspective on the Creator or creative energy. In Taoism, there is the Tao. The Tao is not a deity. It is not a he or a she. It is the source of all gender and therefore transcends it. The Tao is the source of all life, and it is what sustains all life. To put it in more western terms, the Tao could be called the powerful energy that created and supports life. The goal of Taoism is to connect with this energy by living a more natural and balanced lifestyle. One does not worship the Tao, one aligns oneself with it. One does not pray to the Tao, one meditates and contemplates the Tao. You connect with the Tao by aligning yourself with the concept of yin yang, by simply going with the flow of nature. The Tao is not "supernatural" in the sense that it performs miracles; rather, it is that which created and governs the "laws" of nature.

The Hindu concept of Brahman is similar to the Tao, as is the Buddhist concept of Dharma. These are not deities. They do not require us to pray to them in a certain language or worship them. Rather, they represent the fundamental, substantial reality behind a world that is ever-changing. Everything in the universe is constantly growing and shrinking, being born and dying. Everything is becoming something else. But behind this becoming is something that IS. That which IS is that which the eastern philosophies emphasize, not that which becomes.

Eastern traditions focus more on the esoteric (inner) aspects of religion and philosophy, and they focus on the whole rather than the parts. It doesn't care so much about some rigid obligation to a supernatural mystery god, but it emphasizes the importance of transcending the material world, thereby finding one's true divine inner nature and one's place in the universe.

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Justin Richards, B.A. in philosophy

Written Jun 8, 2016

Originally Answered: What makes Eastern different from Western philosophy?

Western Philosophy is a singular tradition which developed in concert, Eastern Philosophies are not quite so linked, but arise in different cultures with different traditions. In other words, Leibniz and Descartes and Kant all read the same ancient philosophers, but, Santideva came from an Indian Buddhist culture, Mozi came from Chinese Confucian culture, and so on and so forth. Western Philosophy is much more of a monolithic structure than is Eastern Philosophy, in fact, Eastern Philosophy is only Eastern from the perspective of the monolithic culture of Western Philosophy.

That being said, there are several rubrics available to broadly compare Eastern and Western thought, but, we must remember that when we do so we are doing this from a Western perspective. One rubric is Intimacy and Integrity, outlined in a book by this name by Thomas Kasulis. These categories have to do with the self and relation to the world, the self and relation to others, the self and its process of identification and self-formation. In a culture of integrity the self stands against world (subject object division), is separate from other people, and identifies itself as an individual. In a culture of intimacy the self is inseparable from the world, is intimately related to others, and identifies itself according to the intimate relationships she has with other people. In the west, we talk about ourselves by first speaking of what we do for work, and other individualistic things, before we speak of our relations to others, while in the east a person is more likely to begin talking about themselves by establishing the relations they have with others. These kinds of cultural differences create fundamental differences in approaches to ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics and so on.

Another way of broadly comparing eastern and western thought was explored by Richard E. Nisbett in *The Geography of Thought*. It has been quite some time since I read this book, but I remember that one of the important differences he highlights is the difference between a focus on the foreground and the background. We can look at this difference by comparing Renaissance art to Zen art, and asking What am I supposed to do when I look at this painting? In a certain period of Zen art, artists would create vast landscapes populated by huts and paths, and rivers and valleys, and soaring mountains. The intention of these paintings was to induce a peaceful sense of connection to the landscape, one is supposed to imagine themselves inside the painting, wandering the paths, occupying the hut. The story of the painting involves you entering the landscape and walking about it. Renaissance painting, on the other hand, has a clear subject, often an explicit allegorical meaning. We are not so much supposed to occupy the painting as we are to confront the painting, have the painting instill in us a certain sentiment, and to appreciate the beauty of the work. In doing so we celebrate humanity.

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Throughout my readings I got to know that A. Einstein and S. Jobs, for instance, have been inspired by Eastern (oriental) beliefs and philosophies. Who are other great Western thinkers in this case?

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