

U3A Philosophy Group Report January 2024

Our first meeting of 2024 saw us attempting to compare the philosophies of the eastern and western worlds. Do they differ and if so, how and why? Traditionally, did cultural differences between east and west give rise to philosophical differences, or was it rather the other way round?

These are big questions on a very large-scale topic, so necessarily we painted with a broad brush. In the philosophical way of things, for every broad statement that is made, plenty of exceptions can be found. Nevertheless, some overall differences can be seen: the west has focused on individualism, reason and the pursuit of knowledge while in eastern thinking there has been more emphasis on the collective, interconnectedness and balance. In the west, logic, scientific enquiry and individual rights have been important; the east has considered spiritual enlightenment, self-realisation and inner peace.

Having identified some “big hitters” (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in the west; Confucius, Lao Tzu and the Buddha in the east), we spent some time digging down into specific areas of philosophy such as the nature of reality, the theory of knowledge, time, and self and identity. On the subject of ethics we found some interesting common ground – Aristotle in Greece and Confucius in China both proposed ethical theories based on virtue.

The subject matter generated plenty of interesting discussion and we will conclude in our next session on 27th February with a look at Chinese political philosophy. We’ll follow on to consider the 20th century French philosopher, Michel Foucault. We are nothing if not wide-ranging.

After that we meet on 26th March; meetings are held in Enterprise House at 10am and of course, everyone is welcome to come along. It’s a chance to singe your brain with some hard thinking and to enquire about the world in new ways.

Clare Tuddenham