Editorial: Eastern and Western Thought in Dialogue

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Everyone familiar with the works of the great thinkers of the dialogue will be aware that the dialogue is not about exchanging opinions or worldviews for the sake of confirming or, even worse, consolidating one’s sense of self or identity. The dialogue is a renewing process whereby selves accept and enact the fact that their formation becomes meaningful, and therefore identifiable, through mutual emptying. Metaphysically, this means that selves and identities owe their existence partly to the way they relate to otherness. Of course, it is dangerously naïve to think that this relational matter of fact justifies a politics of alterity, and there is no shortage of examples throughout history and within our contemporary world. But it is equally injudicious to develop an ideology of sameness, for the extraordinarily rich, complex, and ever-evolving interplay between differences and similarities is the stuff of meaning and, by extension, culture. Ethically, the life, validity and relevance of the process of the dialogue depend on all parties’ good disposition and ability to function according to a sense of recovered or potential balance between selves, identities and cultures; we should bear in mind that the mutating nature of the interplay between differences and similarities creates, from time to time and by nature, imbalance or blurring at the source of suffering or boredom. Needless to say, in various ways, all these issues feature attempts at bringing cultural worlds in relation to each other, whether by cognising, comparing between, entering into, or dialoguing with such worlds. And the idea of bringing Eastern and Western thought into dialogue is no exception.

The idea starts from a questionable premise: that there are such things as Western and Eastern traditions of thinking as unique and recognisable entities, implying therefore a degree of homogeneity in the way we perceive each of them. The same applies to cultures in general or any identified phenomenon, principle, substance and so on. In fact, the same can be said about any entities in the universe that are identified as such. From one angle, the premise can be easily challenged: establishing a dichotomy between two allegedly
homogeneous wholes such as Eastern and Western cultures can only smack of subjectivity, artificiality and even self-interest. For instance, on which basis do we decide what is “western” or “eastern,” and for whom? However, when we begin to think in terms of conditions that allow us to make sense of and therefore identify the heterogeneity of entities, whatever they are, we soon realise that homogeneity is an equally constitutive element. There are no such things as differences if not considered on the plane of similarities; vice versa, there must be a unifying factor in order to discern differences. Overlooking the nature of the interplay between the two is the cause of much misunderstanding when it comes to considering worldviews, traditions and cultures. Neither cultural generalisations nor nominalism and its blind belief in the sole existence of particulars is satisfactory. To discern particulars is conditional upon the existence of a general unifying field, which, in turn, depends on particulars to operate. There are no such things as Eastern and Western thought if they are not considered within the interplay between similarities and differences.

Nishida Kitarô tells us something similar when he states in his *I and Thou* (私と汝, 1932) that “[t]he I and the thou cannot be directly bound together; they are reciprocally united by means of the external world.” He gives the example of language or writing as a means external to entities seeking to relate to each other, which at the same time allows those entities to be “reciprocally united.” What Nishida calls the “external world” is, seemingly paradoxically, the field or place of similarities shared between self and otherness, which precisely guaranties the possibility of differences. In other words, for different entities to be recognised as such they must share something in common – a universal such as language or writing – which, far from being some kind of fictional generality or abstraction, has at the same time a very concrete reality. This “concrete universal,” to borrow Hegel’s wording, is no more than the interplay between similarities and differences. Ways of understanding universals obviously have a very long history in world thought. Universals vary depending on the scale and the concrete, differential particular to which they relate, be they spatial or temporal, geographical or historical, metaphysical or ethical, and so on. In fact, there are as many universals as there are particulars: that is, an infinity.

Understanding the interplay between universals and particulars, or similarities and differences, is essential when suggesting the idea of a dialogue between relevant “entities.” At the simple interpersonal level, one’s identity takes shape as a configuration of differential features precisely from within the field of similarities shared with the other’s identity. At the inter-natural level – that is, when human beings relate to what is commonly called the natural environment – the laws of biophysics partly constitute the shared field that