Ancient Roots of Holistic Education

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What Is Ancient Philosophy?
by Pierre Hadot
Published by Belknap Press (Cambridge MA), 2002

The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies
by Tomas McEvilley
Published by Allworth Press (New York), 2002

Holistic education is sometimes associated with the “new age” movement. This is unfortunate, for its roots can be traced to indigenous and ancient cultures. In this paper I will explore its roots in Greece and India. I am indebted to two scholars in this exploration: Thomas McEvilley and Pierre Hadot. I will examine some of their research regarding the ancients and then discuss the implications for holistic education.

McEvilley

The motives and methods of the Indian schools, and the theological and mystical background of their thought, are so utterly different from those of the Greeks that there is little profit in comparison. (v. 2, p. 53)

McEvilley spent thirty years investigating this statement and found it to be “deeply and glaringly false” (p. xx) and rooted in racist and colonial ideologies. McEvilley, in a work of wondrous scholarship, documents the close relationship between the Greeks and the ancient Indians. For example, he notes that Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit come from a common source (p. xxi). He goes beyond similar superficial similarities between Greek and Indian thought to examine “typological and historical/archeological factors” (p. xxxi). He argues that first there was flow of ideas from India to the pre-Socratics and then back to India during the Hellenistic period.

The seventh century B.C. has been called the “Orientalizing Period” in Greece as “Greek merchants, mercenary soldiers, and tourists were traveling widely” (p. 5). This activity led to Eastern influence on Greek thinking and writing. In the sixth century B.C. Greek-Indian contact took place through the Persian Empire, which extended into India and touched Greece. McEvilley notes that the archeological remains of the Persian palaces suggest “an easygoing multicultural milieu” that allowed for a flow of ideas and motifs. For example, Greek art became popular in Asia as statues from Greece were brought to Persia. Trade routes through Persia also allowed Indian ascetics to come to Greece. It is even reported that an Indian yogi came to Athens to talk to Socrates.

McEvilley also points out a connection between the ancient Hindu treatises, the Upanisads, and the pre-Socratic philosophy of Heraclitus with respect to both cosmology and spiritual practice. For example, both view the physical world as constantly changing and less real than the world of spirit, which Heraclitus called “the hidden harmony.” In both writings, the inner self is seen as more connected to this hidden harmony than to the material world.

In an especially illuminating section, McEvilley explores the relationship between Pythagoras and
Indian thought. Pythagoras was interested in numbers and their connection to astronomy and music. He came to see an “intimate relationship between astronomy and acoustics,” a relationship that suggests the “underlying unity of all things”(p. 48). McEvilley points out that Indian Vedic literature at this time also describes a mathematically defined cosmos that includes the relationship between astronomy and sound. The Indian expression of the universe as sound is found in the mantra Nada Brahma. Berendt (1983) has written a book on this concept and says that not only does Nada Brahma mean that “God, the Creator, is sound,” but more fundamentally that

Creation, the cosmos, the world, is sound.... Sound is the world.

But it also means: Sound is joy; sound praises. And even, Emptiness is sound. And finally, Spirit and soul are sound. (p. 18)

Another important pre-Socratic philosopher was Empedocles, who believed that time was cyclical. He thought that the universe passed through four recurring phases that moved from to Love to Hate and then back to Love again. Cyclical time is also fundamental to Eastern disciplines, particularly Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. Of these, McEvilley says that the Buddhist view of time is closest to that of Empedocles; for it too posits four stages and movement back and forth between Being (Love) and Non-Being (Hate). This cyclical view of time contrasts with the Judeo-Christian-Islamic traditions, which see time as linear, beginning with Creation and ending with the Last Judgment. Today, the Western secular view of time still tends to emphasize scientific progress and linear movement.

Closely tied to cyclical time is a belief in reincarnation, and this idea, too, was shared by both the Greeks and Indians. Aristotle (Problemata 17:3) wrote, “In the movement of the heavens and of each star, there is a circle; so why shouldn’t the birth and death of people circular too, so that they are born and destroyed again (and again)” (Problemata 17:3).

McEvilley observes that Western scholars have never been comfortable with the concept of reincarnation in Greek thought. He speculates that this may be due to underlying Judeo-Christian feelings against even discussing it. He states:

Dominant in the pre-Socratic period, it [reincarnation] survived in a variety of forms through the Roman Empire and was consistently posited by such major lineages as the Platonic and the Stoic. Still it is widely ignored in discussion of Greek philosophy. There is a kind of denial, a pretense that it is not there, like the rhinoceros in the room. (p.117)

The ancient worldview of the Greeks and Indians is close to the perennial philosophy, which suggests that the material world is changing and illusionary when compared to the much vaster spiritual world. Within each person the soul is a microcosm of this spiritual world and can attune itself to spirit through contemplative practices. These practices can lead to freedom from the cycle of reincarnation.

An important section of McEvilley’s book draws parallels between Plato and Indian thought. For example, in the Timeaus Plato’s monistic concept of space is similar to the concept of unity, which is called akasa in the Upanisads.

Moreover, Plato’s concept of the soul is similar to the Indian belief that the soul contains knowledge and wisdom, and that education is a matter of drawing out this wisdom. Plato’s Meno tells us that “there is nothing that the soul has not learned,” and his Timeaus teaches that “each soul is a microcosm of the World Soul.” Similarly, McEvilley points out, the Chandogya Upanisad says that “the little space within the heart is as great as this vast universe.” (p. 166)

Other concepts shared by the ancient Greeks and Indian philosophers include the spherical form of the universe, the relationship between the One and the Many, and the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail all the parallels that McEvilley draws between Greek and Indian thought. I encourage readers to examine his book, The Shape of Ancient Thought, on their own.

Hadot

Pierre Hadot, the French philosopher, makes the case that ancient philosophy was not just an intellectual exercise, but primarily a contemplative practice. For example, the Platonic dialogues were a form of spiritual practice that demanded self-inquiry and self-transformation. Hadot (2002, 65) states that
To live in a philosophical way meant, above all, to turn toward intellectual and spiritual life, carrying out a conversion which involved “the whole soul,” which is to say the whole of moral life.

Philosophy then could be called the education of the soul.

Hadot describes various spiritual exercises that the ancient philosophers pursued in their work. They practiced various forms of contemplation such as being fully present in the moment. For example, the Roman poet Horace wrote:

Let the soul be happy in the present, and refuse to worry about what will come later.... Think about arranging the present as best you can, with serene mind. All else is carried away as by a river. (Cited in Hadot, p. 196)

Being in the present requires constant attention. This constant awareness was particularly stressed by the Stoics. Hadot notes that

For them, philosophy was a unique act which had to be practiced at each instant, with constantly renewed attention (proshoke) to oneself and to the present moment.... Thanks to this attention, the philosopher is always perfectly aware not only what he is doing, but also of what he is thinking (this is the task of lived logic) and of what he is — in other words, of his place within the cosmos. (p. 138)

Buddhists practice something very similar. This practice is called mindfulness which involves moment-to-moment awareness. The Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, has written several books about mindfulness practice. Below are two examples from Hanh’s (1976) The Miracle of Mindfulness which show how mindfulness can be applied to daily life.

**Mindfulness While Making Tea**

Prepare a pot of tea to serve a guest or to drink by yourself.

Do each movement slowly, in mindfulness. Do not let one detail of your movements go by without being mindful of it. Know that your hand lifts the pot by its handle. Know that you are pouring the fragrant warm tea into the cup. Follow each step in mindfulness. Breathe gently and more deeply than usual. Take hold of your breath if your mind strays.

**Washing the Dishes**

Wash the dishes relaxingly, as though each bowl is an object of contemplation. Consider each bowl as sacred. Follow your breath to prevent your mind from straying. Do not try to hurry to get the job over with. Consider washing the dishes the most important thing in life. Washing the dishes is meditation. If you cannot wash the dishes in mindfulness, neither can you meditate while sitting in silence. (p. 85)

Hadot, like McEvilly, explicitly makes the connection between ancient Greek and Asian philosophy. In fact, he observes that our Western heirs were closer to the Orient than we are (p. 279).

Important to both the Greeks and Indians was the presence of the teacher or guru. Hadot (p. 70) writes:

Philosophy then becomes the lived experience of a presence. From the experience of the presence of a beloved being, we rise to the experience of a transcendent presence.

This is similar to concept of darhsan in India which involves being in the presence of an enlightened or realized person. Again, this relationship between teacher and pupil is not just intellectual but is based on affection and love. Hadot (p. 70) argues that the Greeks believed that even the study of science or geometry engages the entire soul and is “always linked to Eros, desire, yearning, and choice.

**Implications**

What are the implications of the works of McEvilley and Hadot for holistic education? For me they have generated a renewed and deep respect for the work of our ancestors. Without benefit of all the knowledge and technology that we have today, they developed sophisticated spiritual practices that are still in use today. I do not believe that we have improved on these practices in any significant way, and in some ways we have removed them from their broader context. With regard to yogic practices in the West, practitioners have focused on hatha yoga, or
the physical postures, rather than seeing yoga as a holistic system.

More positively, contemporary researchers are documenting the impact of these ancient practices scientifically. Our communications systems can also make these practices available to more people.

**Perennial Philosophy**

As mentioned earlier, ancient Western and Asian philosophies are close to what is called the perennial philosophy, and I believe holistic educators can benefit from pondering it. The term “perennial philosophy” was first used by Agostino Steuco in referring the work of the Renaissance philosopher, Marsilio Ficino. Leibniz picked up this thread in 18th century. In the last century Aldous Huxley (1970) wrote a book on this topic. He describes (p. vii) the perennial philosophy as

> the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man’s final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being — the thing is immemorial and universal.

More recently Ken Wilber (1997) has written extensively about the perennial philosophy. Ferrer (2002) has pointed out that it is important not to approach the perennial philosophy in a reductionistic manner. The universality of the perennial philosophy must also respect the diversity of spiritual traditions and practices. Ferrer calls for a “more relaxed universalism” that acknowledges the mysterious relationship between the One and Many. Anna Lemkow (1990, 24) has identified an important paradox in relation to the perennial philosophy when she writes that

> A paradoxical feature of the perennial philosophy is that it is perennial, a recurrent yet openended wisdom that develops commensurately with the evolution of human consciousness. For, as Lama Anagarika Govinda stated in another context, wisdom is not merely an intellectually formulated doctrine, proclaimed at a certain point in human history, but a movement which reveals its deepest nature in contact with different conditions and circumstances of human life and on every new levels of human consciousness.

So the relaxed universalism of Ferrer and the perennial philosophy are not static but dynamic and manifest in different conditions and circumstances.

In my view of the perennial philosophy provides the philosophical foundation for holistic education and contains the following elements:

- There is an interconnectedness of reality and a mysterious unity (e.g., Huxley’s divine Reality) in the universe.
- There is an intimate connection between the individual’s inner self, or soul, and this mysterious unity.
- Knowledge of this mysterious unity can be developed through various contemplative practices.
- Values are derived from seeing and realizing the interconnectedness of reality.
- This realization can lead to social activity designed to counter injustice and relieve the suffering of all beings.

**A Holistic Vision of Education**

The ancient philosophies, both Greek and Asian, support a holistic vision of education — that is, education for the whole person. Education for the ancients was not to be limited intellect but engaged body, mind, and spirit. It included the radical idea that we possess an inner wisdom, buried within the soul, which needs to be drawn out. Holistic educators, such as Montessori and Steiner, also emphasize the importance of nurturing the soul life of the student. A mysterious force within the child can serve as a guide. Modern education, as espoused by departments and ministries of education, has ignored this crucial aspect of teaching. Today we have a truncated and uninspiring vision of education that has been given to us by politicians and the media. The work of McEvilley and Hadot can reconnect us with our Eastern and Western roots and inspire us to re-vision education in holistic terms.
For the ancients, learning should engage the whole person through dialogue, contemplative practices, and the relationship between teacher and student. The relationship between teacher and student ought to be one of affection and love. Holistic educators have acknowledged contemplative practices and the importance of affection and caring in the teacher/student relationship (Miller 2006; Noddings 1992).

Finally, we might explore a new vision of the university inspired by the Plato’s Academy and the ancient Buddhist University of Nalanda. These ancient models might help us find a new vision for the modern university. Nalanda was founded in the 5th Century BC in what is now northern India. At one point there were 10,000 students and 1500 professors there. At Nalanda, meditation was practiced along with scholarship; the university contained both libraries and meditation halls. I had the opportunity to visit the ruins of Nalanda in 1993 where one can still see the outline of these halls and the libraries.

Hadot notes that underlying Plato’s Academy was a vision of community based on love. It is only in this atmosphere that inquiry and dialogue should occur. The aim of Plato’s Academy was to develop the person whose thought and action were congruent and whole. In contrast, some Sophists had turned love of wisdom into the love of words. They had made little attempt to live their lives in accordance with their discourse or espoused beliefs. Such a pursuit of knowledge on a purely intellectual basis has persisted through the decades. As Thoreau noted in the 19th Century, professors of philosophy abounded, but there were few true philosophers in the true sense of the word — people who discussed how to live a meaningful life. As Thoreau (1983, 57) said,

There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers. Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live. To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, or even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictates, a life of simplicity, independence, magnanimity, and trust.

I think Thoreau’s assessment is still valid today. We must do better. By integrating scholarship with contemplative practices and the education of the whole person, we can help students not only gain knowledge, but live full lives.

References

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Education was very important to the Ancient Romans. The rich people in Ancient Rome put a great deal of faith in education. While the poor in Ancient Rome did not receive a formal education, many still learned to read and write. Children from rich families, however, were well schooled and were taught by a private tutor at home or went to what we would recognise as schools. In general, schools as we would recognise them, were for boys only. The holistic education movement emerged in the mid-1980s as a response to the then dominant worldview of mainstream education. It is an educational paradigm that integrates the idealistic ideas of humanistic education with spiritual philosophical ideas. Holistic education theorists propose an integration of what most progressive and democratic movements in education assume should be kept separate: spirituality and humanistic ideals. While these two paradigms may be combined philosophically, the author questions whether they can be jointly applied in a single approach to education. Holistic education is a relatively new movement in education that seeks to engage all aspects of the learner, including mind, body, and spirit. Its philosophy, which is also identified as holistic learning theory, is based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to their local community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace. He drew from the ancient Greek conceptualization of holistic education to propose a modern philosophy of learning. Smuts is considered the founder of “Holism,” which he derived from the Greek word whole.