New Essays in Comparative Aesthetics
In memoriam
Sonja Servomaa
1943-2007
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INTRODUCTION

The essays in this book are in the main those delivered by members of the panel on comparative or transcultural aesthetics who attended the conference *Self and Subject: African and Asian Perspectives* held in Edinburgh in September 2005. Three of the essays, those by Marchianò, Pohl and Wang, are by scholars invited but who were not able to attend. The event was organised by the Ferguson Centre for African and Asian Studies, part of the Faculty of Arts of the Open University, U.K. Comparative aesthetics is the branch of comparative philosophy which seeks to illuminate and refine understanding of the aesthetic dimension of life by comparative investigation of the aesthetic concepts and practices of all the world’s cultures.

As will be evident from its title, the main themes of the conference were the concepts of self and subject, notably how these notions are constructed by and reflected in various cultures, and affected by certain major historical events. The discipline of comparative philosophical aesthetics has an important contribution to make to the debates generated by these terms, as many of the deepest aspects of the self are reflected in aesthetic concepts and practices, as the essays which follow will make clear. The essays themselves are arranged in roughly geographical order, starting with those dealing with Indian culture and proceeding eastwards via Thailand and China to those dealing with that of Japan. The only exceptions to this are the essays by Servomaa and Pohl. The first puts forward a thesis in the aesthetics of nature with examples from several cultures, and the second, though written by a Sinologist, deals with issues applicable to the study of any culture.

In the context of a short conference paper, and even that of its longer published counterpart, it is not possible to set out all the presuppositions which are being deployed in the argument. It is appropriate here, therefore, before turning to look at the essays individually, to set out some of the more important general ideas which are being taken for granted in these essays, and which form the standing beliefs which constitute the philosophical background of the aesthetic ideas discussed by the writers. It happens that the majority of the aesthetic concepts and practices discussed in the essays occur in the context of philosophies for which nirvana or one its fairly close analogues is the ultimate goal of life, and this basic fact has extensive logical, as well as practical, repercussions. When it is done in the context of what I shall call a nirvanic
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System (in a sense to be defined presently), aesthetics tends to take a particular direction in respect of the conception of aesthetic experience, the function of art, the nature of the artist (including creativity) and in other important respects which will become clear. It is appropriate, therefore, to say something about the basic ideas of the philosophical systems in question, and then to say something about some of the typical ways in which aesthetics is conceived of within a nirvanic system.

After that, and before turning to look at the individual essays themselves, it will be appropriate to say something about the one major philosophy discussed in these essays which is not a nirvanic system, namely classical Confucianism.

Nirvanic Systems

None of the major cultures of the world, east or west, north or south, is monolithic, and generalising about them without significant caveats is a hazardous business. Nevertheless it remains true that among the various philosophical traditions which make up any one culture, one or a small number will be dominant and will, as it were, give that culture a characteristic tone, to put it no more strongly than that. The dominant tone of the European tradition, I would argue, rests on assumptions first made explicit by Aristotle. Notable among these is the assertion of ontological pluralism, that is, the assertion that individuals are real and ontologically ultimate. Separateness is real and not an illusion: what there is consists of individuals of various kinds, from sub-atomic particles to galaxies, standing in various types of relations, spatial, temporal, causal and so forth. This belief in the reality of individuals sits very coherently with other beliefs which, if not logically entailed by it, are at the very least compatible with it. One such belief is that human individuals find themselves born into a universe from which they are in important ways separate: they find themselves (as we say in the west) in an environment. Another such belief is that human individuality is valuable and should be cultivated: what we ordinarily call our self, construct though it may be, is real, of value and worth developing. One obvious aspect of doing this is to treat the environment as a resource for the self. The modification of nature to serve the needs of the self accordingly becomes a legitimate goal. In moral thought, the belief in the value of individuals tends to result in a marked development of the concept of the rights of individuals (a concept absent from some eastern languages before westernization), as contrasted with duties. Belief in the ultimate reality of individuals extends also to some conceptions of the afterlife in the west. In orthodox Christianity, for example, we are held to continue to be individuals in
some sense after death, as indeed we must if the administration of divine justice is to be possible. The depth to which the west is wedded to and values individuality in all its forms cannot be overestimated.¹ (It is to be stressed that there are elements in the western philosophical tradition which are not Aristotelian, to some degree, much as there are significant non-european ones which are not nirvanic in the sense to be set out below: comments are made below and at appropriate points in the essays, about these exceptions.)

In what I shall call a nirvanic system, some or all of the above assertions are denied. The principal examples I have in mind are classical Hinduism (derived from the teachings of the Upaniṣads), Buddhism, and to a certain extent Taoism, each of which forms the background to more than one of the essays below. The fundamental point common to the nirvanic philosophies we are here concerned with is the assertion that the division of the universe into enduring individuals, and all the conceptual apparatus we use to identify and describe those individuals and their relations, is either ultimately illusory and misleading, or at best (as in Zen, for example) radically incomplete in a most important way. Further, in the case of each of these three systems, the notion of human individuality and its development is not valued but disvalued, and the goal of life is held to be the dissolution of this individuality. In Hinduism, this dissolution is called mokṣa or release; in Buddhism it is the attainment of nirvana (nibbāna in Pali) or extinction, and in Taoism it is attaining the condition of sagehood, becoming a sheng. What is common to all these conditions is that what we ordinarily call the self, the ego we live with everyday and whose desires we try to satisfy, is held to be an obstacle to salvation, and has to be overcome and in effect dissipated by means of various disciplines. In these philosophies, many aspects of life can be made to contribute to the achievement of this goal, the aesthetic aspect included.

The metaphysics on which the doctrine of the desirability of self-dissolution as a goal is grounded is different in each of the three cases, and it is necessary to say a little about these metaphysics, since key terms or ideas from them are used in the essays in this book.

The Upaniṣadic philosophy rests on a few key assertions: (a) that the samsara, the everyday world of individuals, including what we call our self (the jiva), is ultimately illusory (maya). To believe that the samsara is real is to be in a state of spiritual blindness or avidya; (b) the ultimately real is not the samsara but an undivided or perfectly unified reality, Brahman. Properly speaking, Brahman is beyond description, but to hint in some way at its nature the writers of the Upaniṣads characterise it as having the attributes of being, consciousness and bliss (sat, chit, ananda); (c) not being an individual, Brahman cannot properly be said to act. Brahman has no motives and no components, and there
is nothing other than it on which it could act. To account for its manifestation of itself as the world, the only available explanation is via the analogy of play (lila), that is, pure spontaneity; (d) it is false to suppose that human nature is exhausted by the jiva: we have another component, our true or original self, which is immortal: it was never born and will never die. This component is called atman, and is our true and original self. The atman has no form, and whatever is without form is without limit; whatever is without limit is omnipresent, and in other words god. This argument is the ground for the most celebrated and at the same time the most astonishing of the Upaniṣad doctrines, the assertion of the identity of atman and Brahman:

“Containing all works, containing all desires, encompassing this whole world, without speech, without concern, this is the self [atman] of mine within the heart; this is Brahman. Into him I shall enter, on departing hence.”

This is the view summed up in the much quoted Sanskrit phrase tat tvam asī, “That art thou”, where the “that” refers to Brahman.

The goal of life in this philosophy is to experience directly the unity of atman and Brahman, and to do this the jiva must be dissipated. The means to this end are typically the various yogas, from work to meditation, about which so much has been written in the west, though not usually in the context of attaining the annihilation of the self, for it has to be stressed that the goal which is sought by means of these yogas is not a state of an individual as we ordinarily understand it at all. The yogi is not seeking a state of individual bliss, but a state of bliss not predicable of an individual.

In the case of Buddhism once again the underlying metaphysic departs radically from western individualism: indeed it departs as radically as it possible to depart. So far as I know, no other philosophy in the world has explored the idea of impermanence (aniccata in Pali) as extensively as Buddhism. The Buddhist universe is one in which the conception of enduring individuals of any kind is regarded as totally false. They are an appearance only; the first step on the path to salvation is to grasp deeply the transience of all conditioned phenomena, i.e. all phenomena which are formed or arise from other phenomena, whose origination is (in Buddhist language) dependent. Only nirvana, which is not a formation from anything else and so is not dependent or conditioned, is permanent (nicca). What we ordinarily misconceive as individuals are in fact moment-states of what are termed the five aggregates (khandhas in Pali; skandhas in Sanskrit): physical form; feelings; perceptions; volitions and consciousness. This impermanence is as true of our own selves as of any other type of apparent individual in the cosmos, and this is the meaning
of the central Buddhist doctrine of no-self (anatta or anatman). The paradoxes to which this assertion gives rise were recognised from the first, notably that it is difficult to state (in our ordinary language) what it is, in the absence of individuals, that can be said to enter nirvana:

“Mere suffering exists, no sufferer is found;  
The deeds are, but no doer of the deeds is there;  
Nībōna is, but not the man that enters it;  
The path is, but no traveller on it is seen.”

The goal of Buddhism is the release of all sentient beings from suffering. In the case of human beings, it is held that the source of suffering is desire: to be free from suffering we must free ourselves from desire, and a realisation of the unreality of our own self is one of the major steps on the path to such release, the attainment of which is nirvana. Since the individual self is unreal, there is no special reason to be attached to it, and its dissipation is not quite the bizarre sacrifice it might at first seem. Hence in Buddhism all elements of the human condition are valued according as they help or hinder release from the self and its suffering, and the aesthetic is no exception. The ways in which the aesthetic aspect of life can help are varied, and this matter will be discussed further below in the descriptions of the individual essays.

The canonic texts of classical Taoism (the books attributed to Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu) do not contain a metaphysic as elaborate as that to be found in the Upaniṣads and their commentaries, or in the Buddhist sutras and sastras, but there are marked parallels in certain areas. (As has often been noted, the Chinese found little difficulty in adapting Buddhism to their own intellectual taste, and it is no accident, from the logical point of view, that the Chinese developed the ch’ an, i.e. Zen form of Buddhism to a very advanced point. There can be little doubt that ch’ an is what results if you add Taoism to Buddhism.) The goal of the Taoist is to achieve the state of sagehood and to promote it in others, and this state bears considerable resemblance to the Hindu mokṣa and Buddhist nirvana.

The Tao (do in Japanese) or Way is the ontological ultimate from which all things are held to arise. As is the case with Brahman, to fulfil its logical role it must be beyond all conceptualisation and so strictly speaking is indescribable (if it satisfied any description, it would be limited). Consequently all the descriptions of it in Taoist texts, like analogous descriptions of Brahman, have to be taken as hints at communicating something which is in the final analysis ungraspable by means of concepts:
"The Way that can be told of is not an Unvarying Way;  
The names that can be named are not unvarying names.  
It was from the nameless that Heaven and Earth sprang."  

Consideration of how the Tao gives rise to the universe we observe, the realm of  
the ten thousand things as these texts put it, leads to a notion that will be  
important in aesthetics and which is referred to in a number of the essays in this  
book. Since (once again like Brahman) the Tao is not an individual, whatever it  
brings about cannot be the result of anything that can properly be called an  
action, since actions are changes brought about by individuals. The Tao te ching  
states that the Tao “acts without action, does without doing” (ch. 63). The  
Chinese term for this property of the Tao is wu-wei (Japanese: mui). This  
important term has been translated in a number of ways, notably (and literally)  
as non-action; but to my mind Waley’s version, actionless activity, is much to  
be preferred: non-action tends (wrongly) to suggest that nothing happens, which  
manifestly cannot be what is intended. The Tao brings things about as a result of  
activity which is not action. Now wisdom or sagehood consists in knowing what  
is real and bringing oneself into as close an accord with it as possible.  
Accordingly, the sage seeks to make himself or herself as much like the Tao,  
and so as little like an individual, as possible. Such a person will try to emulate  
the condition of wu-wei. In practical terms this means, as in the Hindu and  
Buddhist systems, to diminish one’s wishes and desires to the greatest degree  
possible to the point of becoming free of them. The sage does not strive for any  
personal end (ch.7); diminishes personal desire to the greatest possible degree  
and so knows “the contentment that comes simply through being content” (ch  
46); day by day subtracts from knowledge (since knowledge of things stimulates  
desire for them), so arriving at inactivity (ch. 48). The sage speaks very little,  
for words embody conceptual distinctions and so lead us away from the Tao  
(chs. 17, 23,56) and desires nothing, and so has a mind that simply reflects what  
it encounters without desire – indeed to the ignorant such a person may seem to  
be like a child or an idiot. (chs 10, 20,49). Though the sage manifests activity,  
such activity will not be action, but rather a form of activity which is entirely  
spontaneous: as involuntary as a reflex (because the sage has no individual will),  
but perfectly adapted to the situation. This ideal of wu-wei can be applied in  
many areas of life, the aesthetic included, and some of its aesthetic applications  
are discussed in the essays below. There are extremely close parallels in the Zen  
tradition, and the ideal of mui can be found in activities from origami to martial  
art (since any type of activity which can be used to promote the suppression of  
the surface ego can be a tao/do).  

The general point I want to make on the basis of these brief reflections  
is that nirvana and its analogues are goals of life which are deeply different  
from, and incompatible with, the goals of life generally pursued in the west: this
is a genuine case of “either/or”. The major exception to this generalisation concerns the western mystical tradition, and between that and the non-western systems under discussion parallels certainly can be, and have been, drawn. It remains the case, however, that the mystical tradition in the west has not occupied a place as central in our culture as its eastern analogues have in their traditions. Now a large part of rationality consists in working out consistently the logical and practical consequences of foundational assumptions, and this is what has been done in the eastern traditions: one can trace the influence of nirvanic assumptions in many aspects of these cultures, in the legal systems, educational systems, organisation of the family, and so forth. It is wholly to be expected, therefore, that the aesthetic aspect of life will be understood in a particular way in these systems. I said above that aesthetics tends to take a certain direction in nirvanic systems and I must now try to make good that claim.

Aesthetics in Nirvanic Systems

There has been a persistent debate in the western philosophical tradition about the relation of the aesthetic and moral/religious domains of life, in particular about whether art (and more generally the aesthetic) is or should be made subordinate to certain moral and/or religious goals, and also whether the moral content of a work of art (if it has one) does or should affect its aesthetic value. A wide range of positions has been taken on both issues. It has been held that art should be made to contribute to moral well-being by having certain sorts of subject-matter, as in the case of Tolstoy’s views, for example, or the theory of Soviet realism which his views so closely foreshadowed. In both these cases, it is assumed that the experience of works of art with an appropriate moral content will induce in their spectators emotional states and beliefs which are morally desirable, in Tolstoy’s case (for example) a belief in the brotherhood of all human beings and a consequent benevolence towards all. At the other end of the spectrum is the aestheticism of Gautier or Wilde, associated with the decadence into which Romanticism developed at the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, in which it is held that the value of art is and ought to be purely aesthetic. Importantly, a great deal of what has been thought on these matters since the Renaissance in the west presupposes the separation which then occurred between religion and philosophy.

This separation, if it has happened in eastern cultures yet, has occurred much more recently, following westernization, and is not present in the classic philosophies discussed in most of the essays in this book. In these philosophies, it tends to be the case that the way in which the aesthetic domain of life is conceived reflects the dominant nirvanic system in a number of ways. As might
be expected, the aesthetic is conceived in terms of the conceptual framework of the dominant system; but more importantly, in western terms, since these systems are primarily religious and moral systems, the aesthetic is firmly embedded in such a context. What one finds is much more like the aesthetics to be found in the philosophies developed in mediaeval Christendom, for example, than aesthetics as it developed in the west after the Renaissance.7

One of the most important areas of aesthetics in which this embeddedness manifests itself is in the conception of aesthetic experience. If there is an orthodoxy in western views of aesthetic experience, it is that such experience is contemplative. What precisely it means for an experience to be contemplative is a question on which opinion has varied, from Aristotle’s description of theoria to Bullough’s psychical distance. In general, however, western analyses of aesthetic experience tend to regard it as in a certain way detached or disinterested: the aesthetic object is not referred to the subject’s network of practical purposes. Aesthetic objects are objects we do not seek to use; rather, we are content just to experience them. Just as importantly, in the context of such experiences our emotions are experienced in a non-standard way. They do not function as motives for or causes of action, but are experienced (as the late R.K. Elliott put it) as within the self but not predicable of it. Their quality is enjoyed for its own sake, with something of the same detachment as we evince toward the outward stimuli of the experience. Such experiences retain a great deal of the conceptualisation deployed in standard non-aesthetic experience, and indeed in some cases such conceptualisation can be fairly sophisticated, e.g. works of art can be experienced under complex stylistic descriptions, referring (for example) to the form of the work, its place in the artist’s development, and so on.

Except in the case of philosophies centrally dependent on mystical insights (as in the case of Plotinus and to some degree that of the Frühromantiker – Novalis, the Schlegels, Wackenroder, and their circle, for example) it is unusual in the west, especially after the Renaissance, for aesthetic experience to be regarded as a mode of salvation. Put another way, it is rare for aesthetic experience to be regarded as being of the same type as or on the same scale as religious experience, and to be valuable precisely because it is like it. In the classic eastern systems, the reverse tends to be the case. Lying behind these philosophies is a rich history of the deliberate cultivation of mystical experience, experience responsible without doubt for the conception of goals like nirvana and its analogues in the first place. Mystical union is a condition in which not only a sense of separate identity is dissolved, but so also is conceptual awareness of objects. Accordingly, the abrogation of conceptual structures claimed to occur in aesthetic experience in these systems can in extreme cases go well beyond anything proposed in modern western analyses of
contemplative states, and this idea can be found in various manifestations in the essays. As the contemporary Chinese scholar Mou Chung San (cited by Man in her essay) puts it, aesthetic states in these systems are best described as subject to a principle of ontological realisation, as contrasted with the western principle of cognitive presentation.

Further, these systems involve the related claim that ordinary conceptual thought is not the highway toward the deepest or final truth but away from it. The ultimate and authoritative form of human experience is taken to be one in which the individual ego has been dissipated, and is a form of experience held to be (in effect) inarticulable and of unsoundable depth. What remains is a direct non-conceptual union with the ontological ultimate of the system in question. This is sometimes referred to as a direct grasp of ultimate truth, though the turn of phrase is unfortunate since it tends to assimilate this rare state to the grasping of propositional truth by the individual mind, a state to which it is in every way different except that of being conscious. Ordinary conceptual thought, (a construction of the surface ego which is itself an ultimately unreal obstacle to final enlightenment) is a veil of illusion which has to be dissipated by the practice of appropriate yogas, of which the Zen practice of meditation on *koans* is perhaps (by historical accident) the most well-known in the west. Consequently, all states of consciousness which can be construed as non-conceptual direct grasping of their content or being of a kind with such a state are especially valued in these systems, as stages on the way to the final enlightenment. Now the imagination does not work by step-by-step ratiocination, and often leads to the creation of objects and the realisation of qualities (like beauty) which cannot be produced simply by following rules or formulae. Accordingly, descriptions of the workings of the creative imagination in these systems tend accord a high value to creative thought and to take a particular view of its nature. This view is as remote as can be from, for example, the view typical in European thought during the Enlightenment and epitomised by Hume, in which the operation of the imagination was viewed as consisting essentially in the power to recombine remembered experiences and fragments of experiences according to our aesthetic fancy. 

A typical example (not discussed in the essays) is furnished by a major theory from classical Indian literary aesthetics, the theory of *dhvani*, meaning resonance or suggestion. In this theory, the goal of art is to induce in us the occurrence of *rasas*, universalised emotions not predicative of the *jiva*, emotions to be savoured in the context of aesthetic experience. In the most perfect cases, the aesthetic experience terminates in the rare condition of *śāntarasa* (*śānta* meaning serenity), a state of absolute calm, close to a religious epiphany, though generally less permanent in its effects. In order to bring about the occurrence of such states, the poet must make use of all the properties of language. The most
important property of language, from this point of view, is its power to suggest meanings that are not explicitly stated. Such meanings are other than (as the Sanskrit grammarians of the time put it) direct or indirect designations. The distinguishing mark of poetic language – what makes poetry poetic – is in this theory precisely the property that rightly chosen language has of suggesting further meanings seemingly without end: properly poetic language is inexhaustible. A successful poem cannot be summed up, for its meanings are limitless and without a terminus: it resonates or reverberates in the consciousness of the reader indefinitely throughout a lifetime. Like the culminating experience of enlightenment, it has a depth of significance which is without limit.\(^{10}\) Now the deployment of language in this way cannot be achieved by the use of reason alone: it is the imagination of the poet which furnishes the language of the poem. Somewhat as in the theory of the penetrative artistic imagination characteristic of Romantic aesthetics in Europe, in \textit{rasa-dhvani} poetics the imagination penetrates to depths of experience beyond the reach of ratiocination. Nor is this approach restricted to the Indian tradition of poetics, but can be closely paralleled with examples from both China and Japan.

Just as the views taken of aesthetic experience and the imagination are coloured by the nirvanic systems of which they are a part, so are the aesthetic virtue concepts in these philosophies, and the \textit{rasa-dhvani} theory furnishes a central first example. Put in western terms, what this theory claims is that the distinguishing mark of poetry properly so called is aesthetic depth or profundity. To exhibit \textit{dhvani} is to exhibit inexhaustible powers of suggestion of meaning, and such a power is the central property of works we call profound. This aesthetic virtue came to prominence in the Romantic period in the west, and it is of course no accident, from the logical point of view, that it did so, for Romantic aesthetics display a logical pattern quite similar (though not quite identical) to that of the eastern systems under discussion. Yet even in the Romantic period profundity was never made a defining property of art, and has not retained since quite the cachet it had at that time. Not so in the east, where aesthetic depth has been honoured in the major traditions as a centrally important property of art. Further examples can readily be found from important theoretical works in both the Chinese and the Japanese traditions. Wherever reality is conceived of as having infinite depth, it seems, it is likely that special value will be attributed to works of art which in some way suggest this, and are such that they induce in us experiences which hint at what it is like to penetrate to this depth.\(^{11}\)

A further example is furnished by the important Japanese concept \textit{sabi}. It is a term with no lexical equivalent in western languages, and again this is no accident, for it is deeply embedded in the Buddhist view of the world. To give a sense of what it means it is necessary to give a list of examples, as follows: \textit{sabi} is a sense of the transitoriness of all things tinged always with sadness or
melancholy; it is felt in solitude; it includes a sense of spontaneity, of all things occurring without relation to others. It is a sense of deep, illimitable quietude; it is more readily experienced when we are older, when it comes without being sought. Sabi has to do with a particular atmosphere, arising from a scene that need not involve a human being, and this atmosphere is generated when something fulfills its destiny in the vast expanse of the universe. To see a creature experiencing its root destiny of transience gives rise to sabi. It is a state of being alone which is not what in English is called loneliness; rather, sabi is a state of being alone in which we are not lonely, but are in a state in which we and all things interpenetrate. Hence sabi pertains to the merging of the mutable and the immutable, the temporal and the eternal. Sabi involves seeing the infinite and eternal in the here and now, and so is akin to satori; it involves the belief that one attains perfect serenity by immersing oneself in the ego-less life of nature.

Works which occasion or embody such feelings are said to possess sabi, and it will be manifest that this quality is an aesthetic expression of some of the chief ideas of Buddhism. The idea of impermanence at the root of Buddhism goes well beyond the sense of the ephemeral sometimes manifested in western art, and the notion of sabi, which is so deeply rooted in the idea of anicca, is an aesthetic concept which is hardly likely to be developed and valued outside such a context.

The same is true in a different way of the concept of wabi. The lexical meaning of this term is wretched or shabby in appearance, but as it was developed in the classical tradition of Japanese aesthetics, especially in the context of the development of the tea ceremony, it comes to have a much deeper, spiritual significance which is once again deeply Buddhist. The type of taste characterised as wabi manifests itself in every aspect of Rikyu’s cha no yu. Underlying all its manifestations – in respect of the architecture of the tea-room, the layout and furnishing of the garden around the tea-hut, and the type of utensils used – is the common assumption that objects both natural and man-made are not at their best when gorgeous or shiny or new or (in respect of natural objects) when flourishing or in their prime. By contrast, the person with wabi taste prefers natural things past their best, beyond full-bloom, even as mere traces left after having faded away; and prefers artefacts which show signs of wear.

Wabi taste contributes directly the realisation of the sudden enlightenment which is the goal of Zen in a straightforward way. The enlightened experience all things as they really are in their suchness, as empty (in the Buddhist sense of that term). Such a person has attained the freedom from individuality and a realisation of the inadequacy of conceptual thought which is called mushin or no-mind. In this state, the mind is like a mirror,
merely registering desirelessly what passes before it. As Dōgen remarks, true practice (i.e. no-mind) comes about when we see things without preconceived ideas, and the most important preconceived ideas are our own desires and wishes. A person who has overcome the partiality of outlook which is inevitable so long as our desires condition our experience can be described as unstained:

“Being unstained is like meeting a person and not considering what he looks like. Also it is like not wishing for more colour or brightness when viewing flowers or the moon….when you want spring or autumn to be different from what it is, notice that it can only be what it is. Or when you want to keep spring or autumn as it is, reflect that it has no unchanging nature.”

Now it is to be stressed that to be enlightened is to experience suchness in all things, not just perfect or flourishing things, and you will therefore make spiritual progress more rapidly if you cultivate wabi taste, and learn experience the imperfect indifferently with the perfect. Any partiality for the perfect is evidence of attachment, and this must be expunged if mushin is to be attained.

This theme of the way in which the metaphysical context of a nirvanic system conditions aesthetic beliefs in certain ways could be pursued further, but these examples will have to do in the present context. It will be clear how deeply embedded the aesthetic beliefs and concepts in question are in this background. It is appropriate now, however, to say a brief word about the major philosophy considered in some of the essays which is not nirvanic, namely classical Confucianism.

A Note on Classical Confucianism

By ‘classical’ Confucianism, I mean the ideas put forward in the Analects and related works attributed by tradition to Confucius and to the Mencius, as distinct from the more metaphysically explicit neo-Confucianism which developed from the second half of the T’ang period onward. Neo-Confucianism is not, as it happens, a presence in this particular collection of essays and so it need not be considered here.

Classical Confucianism is a practical philosophy for this world. Confucius’ goal was to formulate a moral and to some extent political philosophy which, if widely and consistently acted on in human society, would produce the greatest good of which he could conceive, namely a stable social and political order in which human beings could flourish, a stability markedly absent from the conditions obtaining during his lifetime. This philosophy is not at all other-worldly: it is intended as a workable solution to some of the most urgent and practical human concerns. Confucius’ intention is to identify the nature of moral goodness, and to explore how it is applicable to both private
morality and to the theory of government. His approach to these questions is to a degree similar to that adopted by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, being an example of a virtue ethic: the moral philosophy is cast as a description of ideal characters, characterised by a set of the moral virtues in which moral goodness is said to consist. By and large, like Aristotle, Confucius assumes that whether we become morally upright and govern well is up to us. The closest he comes to a metaphysic is his acknowledgement that, despite this freedom and however well we lay our plans, we are sometimes at the mercy of forces over which we have no control. He refers to these forces either as *tien* (Heaven) or *ming* (Fate or Destiny). He does not define either term, and does not use them systematically differently, though there is a hint (e.g. *Analects*, VI, 2) that *ming* denotes an entirely impersonal Destiny devoid of any hint of purposiveness, even on the part of superhuman agents, a conception also present in the *Mencius* (V, A, 6). Beyond that, Confucius does not concern himself with Heaven, Fate or spirits (cf. *Analects*, VII, 20). The *Analects* is centrally concerned to describe his ideal human being, the *chün tzu* or gentleman. (It should be noted that when the term *Tao* occurs in the *Analects* [e.g. at I, 14] it is not being used in the Taoist sense to denote a metaphysical ultimate. It means instead the Way or path of moral virtue.)

The gentleman occupies a position in Confucius’ thought closely analogous to that of the philosopher-kings in Plato’s *Republic*: were the state run by gentlemen, all would be well. The chief virtue displayed by the gentleman is *jen*, a term which once again defies simple, lexical translation because there is no single term in western moral thought which covers the full range of qualities Confucius has in mind: it has been variously translated, for example, as goodness, humaneness, benevolence or human-heartedness. Having *jen* involves being honourable; keeping one’s word; doing as you would be done by; consideration for others; respect for parents and a number of other qualities. If everybody behaved like this (especially rulers and their officials), Confucius contends, life would flourish as much as the accidents of Fate will allow.

This philosophy has one important point in common with the nirvanic systems already discussed (and indeed with Plato’s thought in the *Republic*), namely that in it works of art and aesthetic experiences are evaluated by reference to their moral repercussions. Confucianism is entirely innocent of aestheticism: the moral imperative is assumed to be the properly dominant concern. All aspects of society and modes of conduct are evaluated strictly as Confucius judges them to further or hinder the formation of the type of character he regards as essential for the bringing about of a stable society, and his not infrequent remarks about aesthetic matters are all made on this assumption.
The Essays

The first three essays are concerned mainly or exclusively with the Indian aesthetic tradition. Mazhar Hussain contributes a learned and detailed survey of the concept of *ananda* or bliss. As has been indicated, this begins as the term for one of the qualities ascribed to or principal aspects of Brahman, and Hussain gives an exhaustive account of its usages in the major Upaniṣadic texts, with notes on the opinions of various important commentators. The concept of *ananda* was to have a long and important history in Indian aesthetics. It has been noted that in nirvanic philosophies, aesthetic and religious experience tend to be assimilated or identified, and the Indian tradition furnishes a prime example of this tendency, with the term *ananda* being used to characterise aesthetic experience.

This way of conceiving of aesthetic experience has an interesting consequence which is explored by Rosa Fernández Gómez in her essay. Post-modern theorists have argued that the western intellectual tradition is anthropocentric, and have further sometimes argued that all forms of “centrism” are in some way logically and /or morally suspect. Presupposing that such a view can be stated in a way that is not self-refuting, Fernández Gómez argues that it would still have the consequence of making intercultural dialogue impossible to conduct, since it can only be conducted from a point of view which is of necessity therefore being privileged. Her central contention is that the Indian tradition cannot meaningfully be accused of any cultural partiality, since it aims at a non-differentiated state of aesthetic consciousness, śāntarasa, in which all cultural distinctions, including all manifestations of speciesism or cultural preference are in abeyance. If such an approach can be accused of any sort of centrism it is cosmocentrism, as holistic an approach to experience as the human race has yet devised, a holism which manifests itself (for example) in the many microcosm/macrocosm analogies present in the classic Indian texts discussed by Fernández Gómez.

Grazia Marchianò begins from a point familiar to students of eastern thought, namely that human consciousness has immense depth, a depth not apparent in and hidden by everyday experience, and consequently left unexplored by the vast majority of human beings. A number of the major eastern traditions have developed comprehensive strategies for penetrating to this ordinarily hidden depth. Since what is revealed when this depth is experienced is taken to be ontologically ultimate in these systems, it follows that the journey to reality is taken to be a journey *inwards*. The term “awakening” in the title of Marchianò’s essay is used in a spiritual sense, and refers to our becoming aware of the real depth of consciousness. This term is regularly used in the discussion of religious experience, and Marchianò argues that the
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aesthetic is another path to the same goal. She discusses some of the historically later stages of the tradition of assimilating aesthetic experience to onanda/bliss, together with some examples from other, related traditions, notably Japanese Buddhism. One of the most important of the later Indian examples is to be found in the thought of the great Kashmiri aesthetician of the eleventh century Abhinavagupta. Abhinava asserts that once human consciousness is free from taint (i.e. from an individual point of view and conceptual thought), cosmic energy and consciousness become one, as do true existence and beauty.

Suwanna Satha-Anand takes as her subject one of the most neglected areas of aesthetics, ugliness and the disgust it inspires, and shows how this disgust has been utilised by Buddhist thinkers to further one of the most important of all the goals of Buddhist practice, the liberation of human beings from desires or cravings. There are few more powerful cravings than that for union with another person who has a beautiful body, and the Buddhist parables Satha-Anand discusses attempt to dissipate it by harnessing the power of aesthetic disgust. Once again, the aesthetic domain of life is fully and frankly made subservient to an overriding religious/moral imperative.

Yves Millet takes the image of the cloud, so potent in Chinese thought and art, as the starting point for a revised, Buddhist-inspired conception of the self, a modern version of the doctrine of anatta. He takes as his inspiration the image of the cloud in the poems of Han Shan or the Master of Cold Mountain, a poet manifestly influenced deeply by ch’an/Zen. A cloud is in a state of constant metamorphosis, without fixed boundaries and destined to dissolve, and is a perfect image for the Buddhist conception of the self: an unreal illusion destined likewise to dissipate. In one of the poems attributed to Han Shan not cited by Millet, the poet sums up his insight into the cloud-like nature of the self as follows:

"Have I a body or have I none?
Am I who I am or am I not?" 15

The self is best regarded not as an enduring entity with a fixed inside/outside boundary but as simply a phase in an endless flow of fluctuations. Millet contends that this idea is of benefit to us now, and that we might do worse than regard the self as a porous field of interactions, not a fixed entity identifiable chiefly in terms of what it possesses.

Wang Keping’s essay is in the classic format of a piece of comparative aesthetics, a direct comparison between two major philosophers from distinct traditions, in this case Plato and Confucius. The comparison reveals some major similarities in the area of the aesthetics of music. As has been indicated above, both philosophers are concerned to devise a stable form of government, and both see music as having a key role to play in the formation of the character of
the governors. In each case, this recommendation is based on very similar assumptions they held about the way in which the aesthetic effects of music, which they both assert to be deep and far-reaching, transfer into non-aesthetic domains of life, notably moral thinking. Both take it for granted that aesthetic experiences are not isolated from the rest of life: the psyche is not composed of isolated compartments, as it were. This assumption underlies Plato’s well-known views on censorship, for example, and Confucius held very similar views on which types of music are desirable or undesirable, on the ground of their predictable effects on the characters of their listeners. Both philosophers assume that different types of music have fairly objective expressive properties (noble, licentious, and so on), and that granted sufficient exposure to the relevant type of music these properties will generate their moral counterparts in the characters of their listeners: the nobility or licentiousness predictable of the music will become predictable of its listeners. Hence there is a need for strict censorship by those in charge of the education of rulers, and on the part of the rulers themselves when in office. Wang shows that although there are major similarities between these two philosophers in this area, there remain differences. Confucius, for example, attaches more importance to music as an agent of character formation than does Plato.

Eva Kit Wah Man begins from a particular feminist interpretation of the aesthetics of Kant. According to this view, the relative inferiority which Kant alleges to characterise women in respect of reason and morality is held to be reflected also in his analysis and estimate of taste. (There is an abundance of evidence for Kant’s gendering of the aesthetic not only in the third Critique but also in Section 3 of his pre-critical work, Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen, which discusses the distinction between the beautiful and the sublime in the context of the relations of the sexes.) It follows, on this interpretation of Kant, that women are less capable of experiencing the sublime as Kant analyzes it in the third Critique, the sublime being a characteristically masculine experience involving feelings such as power and domination. Feminist scholars regard this as but one example of a widespread if unacknowledged gendering of the aesthetic, and seek to redress the balance by seeking alternative ways to characterise this area of life. Accepting an analysis of matriarchal art by Heide Gottner-Abendroth, Man finds that its main assertions are already implied in classic Taoism and Confucianism.

The Japanese scholar Akiko Tsukamoto introduces a new element into the discussion as she focuses on the different concepts of naturalness which are used in western and eastern aesthetics and their applications to artistic practice. These concepts follow from the different conceptions of nature and our relation to it which are dominant in the different cultures discussed. It was noted at the start of the discussion of nirvanic systems above that one of the foundational
assumptions of western individualistic metaphysics is that we find ourselves as individuals in an environment from which we are in important senses finally distinct, and this basic assumption colours the way in which westerners conceive of nature and what is to be natural: it has licensed the basic western attitude that nature is a resource to be manipulated to suit our own ends, and in extreme cases it can cause us to feel quite alienated from nature, alone in an indifferent or hostile cosmos. It is important to realise that the western assumption of the ultimate separateness of individuals from the rest of the universe is not shared by nirvanic systems. There is no word in Sanskrit, for example, which means what we mean by an environment, conceived of as something from which we are in the last analysis separate. The bedrock nirvanic conviction that difference is ultimately illusory is reflected in a deep sense that we are an element in a unified whole or oneness (as it were), and consequently that what we call nature is not and indeed cannot be, in the final analysis, separate from us. This feeling occurs over and over again in works manifesting the cultures in question. This statement by the Chinese neo-Confucian philosopher Chang Tsai (1020-77) is typical:

“Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I finds an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions.”

Masahiro Hamashita begins his argument from the premise that, in the modern world, multiculturalism is a fact of life and here to stay. The isolationism possible in previous historical epochs has gone for good, and accordingly we have to find a way to respond to the other cultures with which contact is now the norm. Hamashita’s central assertion is that the Japanese way of responding to other cultures provides a model well worth consideration. There can be no doubt that the Japanese have been heavily influenced by other cultures in the course of their history, notably by China (often via Korea) before the opening of Japan to the west in 1868. However, the typical Japanese response to the institutions and products of these other cultures has never been
one of slavish imitation. Thus certain aspects of Chinese culture were never adopted in Japan, e.g. the system of civil service examinations, eunuch bureaucracy or foot-binding. Further, when an aspect of a foreign culture is taken over in Japan, the Japanese tend to select and emphasize those aspects of it which are to their own taste. The result is something unmistakably Japanese, never just a copy, and this is as true in respect of forms of art as of any other dimension of Japanese life. Hamashita stresses also the value the Japanese place on the cultivation of the self, principally by means of acquiring and perfecting some skill which they need for life. Cultivation of this kind is a typically Japanese way of developing the self, and it is notable that this is closely related to the ever-present idea of tao/do: skills are such that they typically require that we must suppress the ego the acquire and practise them. The development of the self which results is not at all a reinforcement of the surface ego.

It used to be taken for granted in commentaries on Japanese culture that the sense of self of Japanese people was less developed that that of westerners, an assertion which the westerners who made it unconsciously wedded to a belief in individualism and its value-often took as ground for self-congratulation. Leith Morton’s essay deals with two important Japanese writers of the last century, Yosano Akiko and Yoshimoto Takaaki, whose work provides an interesting commentary on simple assumptions of this kind. Morton’s essay discusses the way the social self is constructed, and the way in which traditional attitudes to it have been challenged. The poetess Yosano in particular broke many of the traditional patriarchal taboos, discussing in her poems subjects traditionally regarded as proscribed for public discussion by women. Further, Morton asserts that in art the medium is the message: he shows that the way in which these writers challenge assumptions about the nature of the social self is inseparable from the literary means by which this challenge is made.

The peril of making generalisations about Japanese culture is a point reinforced in Yasuko Claremont’s essay, which discusses the work of two contemporary Japanese prose poets, Hiraide Takashi and Takayanagi Makoto. The work of these writers has a philosophic depth, and manifests contrasting beliefs about the nature of reality. Of the two Hiraide is the more traditional, believing that the everyday world revealed by sense experience is not all there is, and furthermore that we can pierce though this everyday realm and gain access to “the more” which lies beyond the edge of consciousness: this might be seen as a modern version of one of the beliefs constitutive of Zen, one of the most deeply entrenched aspects of Japanese culture. By contrast Takayanagi denies the existence of any realm beyond ordinary experience, but equally he regards this experience itself as in a certain sense illusory. His root conviction about the nature of things is drawn from Sartrian existentialism, to the effect
that non-being (this is Sartrian \textit{néant}, not Japanese \textit{mu}) haunts being: nothingness is as real a presence to him as is being.

My own essay is a discussion of the Zen-derived aesthetic to be found in the philosophy of Nishida Kitaro. The argument is that, even though at a number of points Nishida’s beliefs approach those to be found in certain western philosophies, chiefly those of idealist thinkers, the parallel is never quite complete: in the end, Nishida’s aesthetic is of a kind which is irreducibly Japanese, and the reason for this is logical. Nishida begins from the philosophical bases of Zen, involving insights drawn from the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, and these ideas are incompatible with western ideas at the very deepest level, involving (for example) a rejection of the law of non-contradiction. Such ideas cannot be blended or synthesised with western ideas, and we are faced in the final analysis with finding a way to make a choice between two incompatible ways not just of viewing art but of being human.

The book closes with two essays of a more general kind. The first is by the Finnish scholar Sonja Servomaa, who takes a number of themes mentioned above and combines them in an essay on the aesthetics of nature. As has been indicated, in a number of non-western cultures human beings are regarded as non-separate from nature in a way that has been largely lost sight of in the western societies, so intent are the latter on the domination and manipulation of nature for human purposes. Servomaa begins from a definition of transcultural aesthetics, of which the distinguishing feature is its non-weddedness to the values of any given culture, together with a complementary openness to the beliefs of others. Manifesting this receptiveness in her essay, Servomaa goes on to examine the attitudes to nature manifested in certain Chinese, Japanese and African works of art, and discovers in them an attitude of closer integration of humanity with nature which she commends to us.

The subject of Karl-Heinz Pohl’s essay is one of the major dangers involved in comparative study, namely the all-too readily made assumption that cultural theories devised within one culture, and themselves the product of a very particular set of moral, political and social conditions, can be applied to very different cultures and expected to generate illuminating insights about the latter. There have been a number of examples of western intellectuals applying to non-western societies the latest nostrums fashionable in multi-cultural, individualistic, post-industrial western societies, and embodying some version of the political correctness fashionable among the present day \textit{bien-pensants}. With regard to the acceptance of these theories in the target cultures, at the very best, there will be a time lag between the generation of a cultural theory, its translation into the language of the target culture; its probable adaptation in order to be made intelligible to those living in a dissimilar tradition, and its popularization. It is hard to imagine that this can be done in less than a decade,
by which time a new theory will have taken its place in the à la mode academies of the west. There lies behind Pohl’s arguments a very serious and genuine egalitarian concern. There needs to be a balance in cultural dialogue: at present, the export of theories is all one-way, from west to east and south. It is important that the non-western societies involved find their own voices: they need to be able to express their own authentic point of view, if globalization is not just to be westernization.

It remains only for me to express my sincere thanks to the contributors for their work, which has made possible a book of wholly new contributions to the subject of comparative/transcultural aesthetics.

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Notes

1 I have developed this thesis at length in the essay East is East and West is West: On the Fundamentals of the European and Eastern World Views in Cristina Chimisso (ed.) Exploring European Identities Milton Keynes: The Open University 2003, pp. 230-62
3 Vishuddi Magga, xvi
4 Tao te ching trans. Arthur Waley, section 1
5 There is a long tradition of female initiates in Taoism. See Thomas Cleary (ed. and trans.) Immortal Sisters: Secrets of Taoist Women Boston MA: Shambhala, 1989
6 All quotations from the Tao te ching are from Arthur Waley’s translation, with an introduction by R. Wilkinson. Ware: Wordsworth, 1997.
7 The works of Ananda Coomaraswamy are a locus classicus for comparisons between eastern aesthetics and the aesthetics of mediaeval Christendom.
9 See Hume Treatise I, i, iii.
10 See, for example, Anandavardhana Dhvanyaloka, Third Flash (p.215 in the edition of K.Krishnamoorthy, Dharwar: Karnataka University Press, 1974).
11 For a longer discussion of aesthetic depth in nirvanic contexts, see my The Concept of the Profound, East and West in Gao Jianping and Wang Keping (eds.) Aesthetics and Culture, East and West Beijing: Chinese Society for Aesthetics, 2006, pp. 330-353
12 This synopsis is drawn from a number of sources, but I must single out a special debt to the works of Lafcadio Hearn.
14 I have developed this at more length in my Introduction to the Analects Ware: Wordsworth, 1996
16 Chang Tsai Western Inscription (His Ming) in Wing-Tsit Chan (ed. and trans.) A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy Princeton: Princeton University Press 1963, p.497
ESSAY 1

THE INDIAN SENSE OF BLISS:
THE UPANIŚADIC ĀNANDA

MAZHAR HUSSAİN

Verily, what that well-made (sukṛtam) is—
that, verily, is the essence of existence.
For, truly, on getting the essence, one becomes blissful.
For who, indeed, would breathe, who, (indeed), would live,
if there were not this bliss in space!
For, truly, this (essence) is it that causes bliss.
Taittirīya Upaniṣad, II. 7.

Introduction

The bliss or ānanda, which is defined as ultimate reality and realised in the
highest state of the self, is a nature of the Absolute—characterised as Brahman/Ātman in the Upaniṣads that partially form the Vedic literature. This
e ssay, which is divided into four parts, attempts to delineate the very sense of
this Upaniṣadic bliss or ānanda. The first part of essay deals briefly with the
Upaniṣadic philosophy, especially the problematic nature of Brahman, Ātman,
self and their interrelationship. The unceasing search of the Absolute, which
continued for centuries, ended with the final assumption of the Upaniṣadic
thinkers ‘that the Ātman or the Brahman was the Absolute’ and with this
speculation the Upaniṣadic philosophy ‘reached its peak.’¹ The Upaniṣads
expound that the Absolute is the source of everything including all artistic
activities. Therefore, their aesthetic thought and their sense of bliss are closely
associated with their overall philosophy. The second part explicates the
threefold concept of the Absolute which is at once being, consciousness and
bliss, sat-cit-ānanda or saccidānanda, that has been considered by scholars as ‘the central reality,’² and ‘the most important conceptions of the Upaniṣads.’³
³The third part demonstrates as to how the incremental consciousness of the self
leads the true seeker of the truth through the various states and finally to the