This is an excerpt from a report on the workshop on mind and attention in Indian philosophy at Harvard University, on September 21st and 22nd, 2013, written by Kevin Connolly, Jennifer Corns, Nilanjan Das, Zachary Irving, and Lu Teng, and available at *http://networksensoryresearch.utoronto.ca/Events_%26_Discussion.html*

## 5. Are there cross-cultural philosophical themes?

Do philosophical themes transcend cultural boundaries, even without communication between cultures? In his commentary on David Nowakowski's talk, Farid Masrour argued that some papers at the workshop, including Nowakowski's paper on Udayana, provides evidence that there are some cross-cultural themes in philosophy, which occur at distinct locations in spite of the very different cultural contexts in which they have been embedded. However, a critic of this idea might point out that there is a tendency to misconstrue the ideas from other cultures, including those from Indian philosophy. In such a case, the apparent similarity between ideas would be artificial. So, the argument goes, we need to avoid importing our own ideas onto Indian philosophy.

In his commentary, Masrour pointed to three issues that are commonplace in western philosophy debates and implicit in the framework in which Udayana is working. First, there is a well-developed epistemology, in particular, a sophisticated theory of inference. There is also a well-developed account of perception that sounds like a direct realist account of perception. Thirdly, there is an account of the origin of cognition that sounds like an empiricist view. In short, it seems like Udayana and his interlocutors took various positions in logical space on issues and topics that have been important for philosophers of a different tradition that did not seem to have any communication with these people. This gives some support for the idea that there are some cross-cultural topics and themes in philosophy that occurred at distinct locations in spite of the very different cultural contexts in which they have been embedded. Because of

this, Masrour argued, contemporary work on Indian philosophy can offer a significant contribution to philosophy, in that it can provide evidence for the existence of trans-cultural philosophical themes.

A critic might highlight the following, however. Consider the difference between the projects of examining what Ancient Western Philosophy had to say about issues surrounding direct realism, as opposed to the project of examining what Indian philosophy has to say about those issues. With the Ancients, despite the temporal divide, arguably there is a tradition connecting them to us. With Indian philosophy, however, the case for a unifying tradition is much harder to make. Given this, there might be a special danger of importing our own ideas onto Indian philosophy. In the case of the Ancients, while there is still a danger, there is reason to believe that our contemporary ideas might be similar to theirs: our contemporary western philosophy arose out of theirs. With the case of Indian philosophy, there is no such reason.

We are sympathetic with the idea that there are cross-cultural philosophical themes. But even if this is not the case, there are alternative ways to develop a dialogue between Indian philosophical traditions and contemporary western philosophy. We have thus far discussed workshop presenters (including Nowakowski) who used contemporary ideas to interpret ancient Indian philosophy. In contrast, presenters like Kranti Saran and Jake Davis, and Evan Thompson in his commentary, used examples and theories from ancient Indian philosophy to engage with contemporary western debates.

In his reply to Saran's talk, for instance, Thompson advocated for a new kind of cognitive science to bring Indian philosophy to bear on modern western debates. He argued that Indian meditative and philosophical traditions offer hypotheses, such as Saran's claim that there can be attention without selection. Such claims, however, need to be conceptually, phenomenologically,

and experimentally disentangled. And that takes a certain kind of cognitive science, which he called "Cross-cultural Contemplative Cognitive Science."

In his response, Saran added that he thinks there are several ways to engage with the Indian Philosophical tradition. One is by engaging philologically; that is, through a method that is grounded in texts. A second way is Thompson's way: using experiments to naturalize claims made in Indian philosophy. A third way, Saran suggested, is by just treating the ideas as philosophy, without worrying about textual fidelity or about how the ideas can be tested empirically. Saran argued that we should not see the ideas of Indian philosophy as unpalatable, but rather as authentic ideas from a tradition, ideas that have their own internal justification and logic. We should take the ideas seriously as philosophy, he argued, and engage with them.