

**Discovering  
the treasures of  
wisdom**

**English transcript  
to the  
podcast**

# Discovering the treasures of wisdom

## Methodological podcast on the METIS Project

### English transcript

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*ES = Eliane Schmid*

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*ES: Hello and welcome to Wisdom Talks, the podcast accompanying the METIS Project, the internet portal for intercultural wisdom literature, and wisdom practices, which can be found on [www.metis.ethz.ch](http://www.metis.ethz.ch).*

*In this edition, we turn our attention to the methodological foundations of the METIS Project, which we discuss with Michael Hampe, professor of philosophy at ETH Zurich and initiator of this intercultural philosophy platform. My name is Eliane Schmid and I welcome our listeners, and of course, Michael Hampe, who is here in the studio with me today.*

*MH: Hello.*

*ES: Hi, and welcome. Mr. Hampe, the project's self-description states that you wish to make the world's literature of wisdom accessible and bring diverse traditions into conversation with one another, yet without taking a Eurocentric approach or adopting anthropological essentialisms. These are laudable intentions, but of course it also raises several questions concerning the modes of realization of your ambitions. Let's get started with a central term that we should clarify first. "World literature of wisdom" – what is this all about?*

MH: The term world literature was coined by Goethe in his journal “Über Kunst und Altertum”, on art and ancient times, and it is a term that is now quite common, but it was an unusual term in his time because people thought of national literatures. The translation industry was not as busy as it is today. And Goethe himself was interested in texts from the Islamic realm. For example, when he wrote the *West-östlicher Divan*, the *West-Eastern Diwan*, he was also interested in French literature and English literature and thought that one should produce the literature that is not just bound to one nation, but that is accessible and interesting all over the globe. Nowadays this seems to be a quite common idea, but in fact it is only common in the arts and in literature and not so much in philosophy. We do not have a world philosophy, and we do not have a world literature of wisdom yet, although people in Europe are interested in Chinese wisdom texts and Japanese texts. Philosophy and schools of wisdom are usually focused on certain cultural traditions, sometimes even on national traditions. And we now need for different reasons, a global perspective in politics, that was already an idea of Kant, that we need a *Weltstaat*, a politics that is focused on solving problems not on the level of nation states, but on a global level, because of ecological reasons we have this necessity nowadays. And one could think about treasures of wisdom being accessible cross-cultural like novels or poems, and by that supporting the understanding of people from different cultures.

*ES: So we're actually going back to theories and thoughts that were developed earlier and trying to apply them nowadays because we can use them again because they're very... things that we need now, right now, to think about, as you said, ecological problems.*

MH: Yeah, exactly. I think that in technology and in science, we have a strong development that leads to new insights that make old theories and old technologies obsolete. But it's different in literature and it's different in philosophy, and it's different in wisdom. There is no such thing, I would say, as progress in the wisdom literature so that you can say, “Well, this talk from wisdom literature is 2000 years old. We have overcome that.” That's not the case. There is no such thing as a methodology that leads to a linear progress in literature, art or wisdom.

*ES: But what I ask myself here is are there no problems or even barriers concerning these cultural understandings and the exchange? I mean, can we look at those old texts that you just mentioned without knowing the historical context? Don't we need to have some kind of background?*

MH: You certainly need some kind of background in order to understand a text. The most fundamental background is that you understand the language. And for that you need a good translation. And then you have different levels of understanding a text. In fact, there was already something like a Pan-European scholarship in medieval times, and in medieval universities Aristotelian text played an important role. And as most of you will know, Aristotle was first translated from Greek into Arabic. And when the Islam transported Aristotle to Spain and France, it was an importation of Aristotle's philosophy to Northern Europe. Aristotle was read first in Arabic, then in Latin, and then in the Renaissance people learned Greek again and could read Aristotle in the original. And all these different receptions of Aristotle, the Islamic reception, the Latin reception, and then again the Greek reception revealed different levels of understanding. And I think that's something that applies also say to Indian or Chinese texts that first you read them in an English translation or in a German translation, then you might start learning Chinese or Sanskrit or Pali or whatever, and then you get to a deeper level of understanding. And then you might even try to get informed about the cultural background that was present when the text was produced.

*ES: So the language plays a key role actually in how we understand these different texts?*

MH: Well, I think the language is the first barrier you have to overcome. You need good translations. And these translations are already interpretations and transportations of ideas into a different cultural realm. And once you have a good translation, you have an entrance door to an intellectual sphere that is not as alien to you anymore as it might have been if you would just have started to learn the foreign language. So, the translation activity is something that already connects different cultures.

*ES: I like this idea of entrance door. I do wonder though, if we have this entrance door and we use it, how do we compare different traditions in their practices? How can we use different angles to look at these different traditions and thoughts?*

MH: That's a very important question because it relates to what you mentioned first, namely that we try to avoid essentialism. The idea of essentialism is that if you translate texts, or if you compare cultures, or if you compare say animals, you might come to something that is independent from any culture, some essence that is say eternal, an eternal essence of human nature, an eternal essence of human life or human problems. And that would mean that you could thematize human life, human problems and ideas of dealing with these problems in wisdom independently from a culture or a certain language. And we believe that you cannot do that. We have no universal language and we have no universal culture that looks at human problems. Our only possibility is to look at human life and at human problems from the perspective of a certain culture. But once we have these entrance doors or these passageways, we can try to draw analogies or homologies, comparisons that make the way people in other cultures look at our culture more understandable without producing the idea of an essence. Even if people in China, in Japan, in Europe, in America are born and have to die, they interpret what it means to be born and to die in very different ways. The problem of essentialism has to be avoided by the right way of comparing different perspectives which you cannot overcome.

*ES: I see. This is actually also a very personal endeavor in how we try to look at these different things like you mentioned life and death. So even if I'm a Swiss person and I think about life and death, how we were taught it, but then if I look at Japan, there are different ways of looking at these things. So is this something, you said it's a universal thing, but do you think it's innately personal in that case? Or cultural? Or do you combine these things all the time?*

MH: I think you have to combine them, that you have to understand yourself as looking at birth and death, say from a certain cultural perspective, which you might not have recognized before. You might not have recognized what it is for a Swiss person to look at her life in a certain way. And only if you mirror your Swiss life, say in the mode in which life is conducted in

Japan, you might see that there are certain specialties in your form of life, if I may use this Wittgensteinian term, that are different from the Japanese way of life. By mirroring yourself in a different culture, you not only understand bits and pieces of the other culture, but you also get a perspective of your own culture and the way your culture is forming your personal life. This idea of mirroring in fact is one that was not invented by us for this portal, but it came also up already in Goethe's novels and it was picked up by Wittgenstein when he talked about family resemblances.

*ES: Could you go deeper into this topic of Wittgenstein and these family resemblances and the mirror reflections that you talked about, and in connection to the project also, this seems like a very interesting point of access.*

MH: Yeah, yeah. Goethe in his novels on Wilhelm Meister put aphorisms and stories into the novel, and he thought that these stories mirror each other and throw certain light on problems he was dealing with in the novel in general. So, there was a method of enlightening problems and ideas by having different types of texts that relate to each other, but the reader might not immediately see how they relate to each other. But what you get is a sort of album. Album of different types of texts, and then the reader starts to think, "Well, how does this text relate to the other text?" And if you think hard about this relation, you start to see how the texts mirror each other.

And the same method was used by Wittgenstein, by the late Wittgenstein when he was composing the aphorisms in his *Philosophical Investigations*. You have lots of little stories, remarks, reflections, and somehow they mirror problems like, "Is pain a thing in my mind?", "What does understanding mean?", without producing a universal theory of pain or understanding. He's not doing philosophy of mind, or the same thing as Descartes did in his *Meditations*, but he is handling the problems in a very loose and lucid way. And Wittgenstein himself used the idea of family resemblance for his way of avoiding essentialism. Instead of giving the essence of pain or understanding, he was telling us little stories about pain and understanding. And the same you could say by looking at pictures from members of a family. You do not see the essence of the family Schmid, if you look at pictures from yourself and your

parents and your siblings, but you might see similarities. You can mirror, say, your face in the way the face of your mother or your father looks. And then suddenly you see, well, there is something in these faces that runs through all pictures. Or not through all pictures – you could say, “The nose of my mother appears in my face, and the ears of my brother appear in the ears of my sister,” and so on. So you can see family resemblances without identifying the essence of the Schmid family. And the same you could in fact say about wisdom that there are ways of dealing with death, with friendship, with hatred, with war, in Japan, in China, in India, and in Europe. And you can find your way from China to Japan, from Japan to California, say without saying, “Well, that’s the essence of war. That’s the essence of friendship.” But there is a line of comparison that might pop up if you put wisdom texts from these different cultures to certain topics next to each other. You certainly have to identify topics, and that’s very difficult. You have to find the term friendship in China and the term friendship in Chinese and in Sanskrit. And sometimes it might be very difficult to find in the other language, the comparative term.

*ES: I see. So we actually have a set of clues that Wittgenstein prepared for us. We train our eye to see, as you said, the family-Schmid-pictures and we can try and find mutual things that kind of connect us. Is it in that case about finding mutual thoughts, finding comparisons that we can make? Or is it more of... we look at different texts next to one another? Do we want to find comparisons, or just see them as things next to one another?*

MH: I think you find methods of comparison that you, for example, if you look at the term ‘empathy’ in English, the term ‘*Mitleid*’ in German and the term ‘*Metta*’ in Pali, say somehow they relate to each other. But you would not say that you practice *Metta* in the connection with the English term ‘empathy’. You wouldn’t say that empathy is a practice like riding your bike. You would say you feel empathy, and there are people who are more empathetic than other people, whereas in Pali, you could say you follow the practice of *Metta* by doing a certain type of meditation, say. So by doing these comparisons, you find both some things that overlap, like that you find the nose of your father in your own face, and you find differences that you see that the mouth you have is different from the mouth of your father. And so you see that while empathy in the context of Buddhism and the language of Pali is somehow similar to what we

understand by empathy, but there are also differences because you practice empathy like you practice playing piano, and that's what is usually not happening in England, say. And then you might start reflecting, "Well, should we practice empathy as well as they do in the Buddhist context, or shouldn't we?", or "Should the people in Buddhist countries understand *Metta* in a different way?" And then you get into a reflection that ideally will lead to a better understanding of the other cultures. And you might even learn things that you could not learn in your own culture.

*ES: But taking up this idea of practice. So, do we then need to actually have an eye for what we want to see? In the sense that if I know that we're related, I will automatically try and find resemblances? And is that something we also do then in wisdom, literature and philosophy? If I think, ah, 'love', how can we find other similarities in thinking? Do we need to have this basis to start from that we think that there are resemblances?*

MH: Yeah, I think there is a certain basis among human beings that is very difficult to put into language. But people from different cultures fight battles against each other and they threaten each other with death. And also death might mean something very different in say, Buddhism than in Christianity, or in Daoism, and in ancient Greek, Lucretius. Nevertheless, the practice of waging war and threatening another human being with death is in a sense universal. But what it is, what this practice means, is only spelled out in a certain culture. A more friendly, or nicer, example would be that people fall in love with each other, not only in one culture, but in different cultures. Chinese people marry people in the US, and Japanese people marry sometimes people in Europe. And although love means something different in China than in the US and in Japan and in Europe, nevertheless the phenomenon that people fall in love with each other and have children is something that connects people. So there are practices and phenomena that connect people over cultures, although they might not understand what these practices and relations mean on a universal level. They only know it from the level of their own culture.



*ES: Now, if we think about these connections, also, I would like to bring another dimension to this, and that is the one of academia. We are in an academic setting right now. And I wonder how do we use the setting of academia to look at wisdom traditions and wisdom, and how can we then relate this back again to the “outside academia life”, right?*

MH: Yeah, yeah. Well, the tendency to deal with texts from different cultures that you would describe as wisdom literature is to look at them in a philological and argumentative way. If you study the history say of Chinese philosophy, you look at philological problems in these texts and you might look at the historical cultural background, but you do not need to apply the content of this text to your life. I can study, say, what Socrates said about death without trying to lose my fear of death myself. So there is an objective perspective onto literature and wisdom literature, which does not apply this literature to the life of the readers. And there is a more personal or subjective dealing with the text. That you read texts in order to find a practice or an insight that might help you in your own life. And I think one help humans need at the moment is that to develop a deeper understanding of people from other cultures, that’s in fact a very old project, which you can describe as a project of enlightenment. It is sometimes sad that the first enlightenment in ancient Greek happened because the people in Athens, and in other city states, at that time say 500 to 400 BCE, got to know people from other cultures and therefore were disturbed how they should understand them. And then they started to reflect about how the way of life, say in Persia or in Asian countries, related to their own way of life. And that led to a type of philosophy which was personalized in Socrates, which one can describe as ‘enlightened’. And the same happened when people discovered other continents and people living on other continents in the Renaissance. And a second enlightenment happened then that people tried to understand, say for example, Christian Wolff who read Chinese philosophy. He was an enlightened philosopher who worked, at least in part, cross-cultural as well. And Kant was influenced by Wolff, and therefore also by Confucius, perhaps.

*ES: Just to jump in here, I was wondering how can we bring this to the enlightenment that we can gather from the platform? How does the METIS Project help us find new ways to think about all these things?*

MH: The idea is that we present something like an album that we present texts from different cultures, and that people do not only look academically at these texts, but that they read them as something that might be relevant for their life. And then we interview specialists, philologists, historians, philosophers who have studied these texts deeply, in order to give a cultural background, so that you can have different levels of understanding of these texts. But by looking at the album of texts about death, of friendship, of love, hate, or whatever, from different cultures, we will try to support something like a global understanding, or a global ... or try to support some sort of a “third enlightenment” that might lead to the ability to cross the borders of your own culture and to understand that your way of living is not the only possible way of living, without putting some universal culture over the whole globe. So that you see, “The people in China do it differently. But I can understand how they do it. And by understanding how they do it, I might even understand how I live in a better way.”

*ES: So this is a really collaborative project. Users can interact actually with the platform. Through these podcasts, we learn from different experts. And so there's, like this, very fruitful exchange going on.*

MH: That's the idea that there should be an exchange between experts and non-experts, and that even people should put their personal experiences on the platform by writing little stories or reports, what they think about death, or birth, or friendship, or love, and relate that to wisdom traditions, so that you have all levels of reflection, personal reflection, about your own life, reflections about your own culture, and reflections about possible relations of your culture to different cultures.

*ES: I like this end note of reflection. I think I will take this idea to go and reflect somewhere myself, and we'll end this podcast with the idea of going to reflect. Thank you so much for being here, Mr. Hampe, and explaining all these intricacies of the METIS Portal to us. And I would like to urge our listeners to curiously plunge into the portal to look what you can find there, to try and access all the different forms of wisdom, literature, and philosophy that you can find there.*

*And I would also like to refer you to the show notes that you can find below this podcast and hope that you will listen in on Wisdom Talks again soon. Thank you very much for your time.*

MH: Thank you.

*ES: This Meta-Metis Wisdom Talk was produced by Martin Münnich and supported by ETH Zürich and the Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum in Hamburg.*