

John Dewey and Intra-cultural Philosophy

The world today is a very special world. Cultures and civilizations are coming into contact to a degree that has never before been possible. Humans have known for a long time that the earth was round. Now we are discovering that knowledge, as it circulates about the world, can also be thought of as being round.

—John Dewey, Guangdong Educational Association, July 1921

Philosophy East and West

The first two East-West Philosophers' Conferences at the University of Hawai'i constitute an important chapter in the history of comparative philosophy. Wing-tsit Chan recalls the first meeting in 1939 as a "very small beginning," one that served primarily as the impetus for F. S. C. Northrop's thesis that East and West represented two contrasting styles of thought. As Chan remembers, "We saw the world as two halves, East and West." Accordingly, in his subsequent 1946 work, *The Meeting of East and West*, Northrop "sharply contrasted the entire East, as using doctrines out of concepts by intuition, to the [entire] West, as constructing its doctrines out of concepts by postulation."¹ The purpose of the second meeting in 1949 was to study the possibility of achieving a "world philosophical synthesis" between East and West. This broader perspective would be cognizant of similarities as well as differences. Areas of agreement on issues in metaphysics, ethics, and social theory were duly noted at the conference.² But since there could be no "orchestrated unity" composed of identical principles alone, differences were refined and preserved, these being important as the "basis of the synthesis."³ Pursuant to the goal of achieving this world philosophical synthesis, Charles A. Moore founded the journal *Philosophy East and West* in 1951.

It is unlikely that John Dewey ever read *The Meeting of East and West*. Friends had advised him against it. "That Northrop book I mentioned the

other day is not worth looking at," Arthur Bentley told him.⁴ "Full of sweeping statements, more stimulating than reliable," is what Albert Barnes had learned.⁵ Dewey saw reviews of the book, and suggested to Sing-nan Fen that a "critical account of [Northrop's book] might be a good jumping off place for publication."⁶ But it was Dewey who would contribute to East-West philosophy at this juncture. In 1950, he wrote a letter to Moore in which he had some "complimentary things" to say about the forthcoming journal.⁷ Moore wrote back, asking permission to include parts of Dewey's letter in the "News and Notes" section of the first issue. Moore stated his preference, however, that Dewey write a fresh statement "expressing [his] conviction about the specific philosophical relationship between Oriental and Occidental philosophy or, perhaps, stating [his] ideas as to the best philosophical approach to a substantial synthesis of East and West."⁸ In response, Dewey composed what would become the first article ever to appear in *Philosophy East and West*—a short piece entitled "On Philosophical Synthesis."

Fittingly, the article was written in Hawai'i. Hoping to improve his declining health, Dewey sailed with his family for Honolulu just weeks after receiving Moore's letter. When the SS *President Wilson* docked on January 17, 1951, a delegation from the University of Hawai'i came to receive them at the pier.⁹ Dewey's "valuable article" would be written seaside on Waikiki beach, under a canopy of palms in the breeze-swept cottages of the Halekulani resort.¹⁰ Though modest in length, the vision it relates is remarkable for its clarity, sophistication, and foresight. It is also noteworthy as a bold rejection of Northrop's thesis that "East" and "West" are discrete and separable entities. In its entirety, this is what Dewey wrote:

I think that the most important function your journal can perform in bringing about the ultimate objective of a "substantial synthesis of East and West" is to help break down the notion that there is such a thing as a "West" and "East" that have to be synthesized. There are great and fundamental differences in the East just as there are in the West. The cultural matrix of China, Indonesia, Japan, India, and Asiatic Russia is not a single "block" affair. Nor is the cultural matrix of the West. The differences between Latin and French and Germanic cultures on the continent of Europe, and the differences between these and the culture of England on the one hand and the culture of the United States on the other (not to mention Canadian and Latin American difference), are extremely important for an understanding of the West. Some of the elements in Western cultures and Eastern cultures are so closely allied that the problem of "syn-

thesizing” them does not exist when they are taken in isolation. But the point is that none of these elements—in the East or the West—is in isolation. They are all interwoven in a vast variety of ways in the historico-cultural process. The basic prerequisite for any fruitful development of inter-cultural relations—of which philosophy is simply one constituent part—is an understanding and appreciation of the complexities, differences, and ramifying interrelationships both within any given country and among the countries, East and West, whether taken separately or together.

What I have just said might at other times and under other circumstances be considered so obvious as to be platitudinous. But at the present time and in the present circumstances, I venture to think that it is far from being such. Under the pressure of political *blocs* that are now being formed East and West it is all too easy to think that there are cultural “blocks” of corresponding orientation. To adapt a phrase of William James, there are no “cultural block universes” and the hope of free men everywhere is to prevent any such “cultural block universes” from ever arising and fixing themselves upon all mankind or any portion of mankind. To the extent that your journal can keep the idea open and working that there are “*specific* philosophical relationships” to be explored in the West and in the East and between the West and the East you will, I think, be contributing most fruitfully and dynamically to the enlightenment and betterment of the human estate.¹¹

The motive behind Dewey’s comments can be understood on different levels. On one level, they reflect his alarm at the emerging Cold War.¹² On a deeper level, however, they reflect his current thinking on “the intimate connection of philosophical systems with culture,” a preoccupation that absorbed him during the final years of his life.¹³

This latter dimension is now better understood thanks to the recent recovery of the manuscript, *Unmodern Philosophy and Modern Philosophy*.¹⁴ This remarkable work, one that Dewey considered “the summation of his philosophical beliefs throughout the years,” was never finished and then reportedly lost in 1947.¹⁵ Dewey conceded before the manuscript went missing that he was not satisfied with its progress, and expressed frustration that the project “never would jell.” Significant drafts, however, have now been recovered from the Dewey archives, and despite their fragmentary nature, there are clear objectives driving the book.

The intent of the project was twofold. First, Dewey wanted to establish “culture” as the irreducible context in which everything human occurs. Accord-

ing to Phillip Deen, Dewey intended in this work to make culture “the most inclusive category within which various regions of human life interact.” Second, Dewey sought to trace the sociocultural history of Western philosophy and to contextualize its problems accordingly. “The purpose of this book,” Dewey writes, “is to discover the cultural source and context of problems and distinctions which have taken on technical philosophical meaning.”¹⁶ To this end, the work was divided into two parts. The first part was devoted to the analysis of Western intellectual history, especially the role that Greek-medieval assumptions played in the modern period. The second part was a critical treatment of certain dualisms that persisted as a result: “Things/Persons,” “Mind/Body,” “Theory/Practice,” “Material/Ideal,” and “Nature/Human.”

Had the manuscript been fully realized and published in 1947, it likely would have impacted the East-West Philosophers’ Conference in 1949. Dewey regarded the project as one with direct relevance to East-West philosophy. He had come to recognize that certain puzzles that occupied Western philosophy “played no particular role in [Chinese] systems.” This suggested to him that such problems had their sources in the “cultural history of the European world rather than in the factual subject matters” under consideration.¹⁷ He thus notes in his drafts that one of the wider ends served in *Unmodern Philosophy* would be the “realization that a problem that appears to be the same problem when it is stated in general terms . . . has, in fact, different contents and directions according to the cultural situation in which it is bred and nourished.” Such differences, he notes, are “of utmost import for the hardly as yet commenced comparative study of the course taken by philosophers in China and India in their contrast with the European tradition.”¹⁸

Such sensitivity to the cultural situation of world philosophies was not universally shared at the 1949 conference. The Sinologist Herrlee C. Creel, for instance, laments the treatment of Chinese philosophy at the Second East-West Philosophers’ Conference, where scholars “too seldom tried to analyze Chinese thinking on its own grounds and in its own terms.”¹⁹ As Moore relates, one of the noteworthy achievements of the 1949 conference was to establish that, “the philosophy of China must not be overlooked . . . nor must it be considered similar to or identical with the philosophy of India simply because both are Oriental.”²⁰ The Hawai`i conference helped to change such simplistic thinking, and Dewey furthered this process with his article in *Philosophy East and West*. Among those helping to pave the way in Honolulu was Cornelius Krusé, a Wesleyan University philosopher who admired Dewey as the “inveterate foe of all dualisms” and who was probably the first American to deliver a lecture connecting Dewey’s educational theories with Confucian philosophy.²¹ Krusé is credited with stressing that, “There is great complexity of philosophical doctrines and methods in the East, and it may

be added that this complexity exists, not only *among* the various countries of the East, but also *within* each of the several countries, and frequently within particular systems of one given country or philosophy.”²² As Moore reports, this would become the consensus view by the time that East-West philosophers met for a third time in 1959.²³

It is hard to know whether the completion of Dewey’s lost work would have altered the course of East-West philosophy. One thing, however, we do know. The rediscovery of this work now provides us with a fuller context in which to understand his inaugural statement in *Philosophy East and West*. That statement, despite its prominent place in the journal, has never really been examined. How, after all, *should* comparative philosophers respond to the uncomfortable irony that the opening sentence in their flagship journal, *Philosophy East and West*, is one that rejects the very distinction between East and West? With an important link now restored, we can better understand what prompted Dewey to say what he did.

The year that Dewey’s comments appeared in the journal was the same year that he returned to writing his “Re-Introduction” to *Experience and Nature*. This is the juncture at which Dewey famously wrote, “Were I to write (or rewrite) *Experience and Nature* today I would entitle the book *Culture and Nature*,” explaining that the term “culture” could now “fully and freely carry my philosophy of experience.” The rationale for replacing the term “experience” with “culture” was foreshadowed in the 1949 version of the “Re-Introduction.” Here, Dewey explains that “experience,” as he used it in 1925, was meant to designate “all which is distinctively human.” He came to realize, however, that it is a “fitting name for the special way in which humans, at least in the Western world, have shaped their participations in and dealings with nature,” an insight which, “entails the recognition of philosophy’s variability in different cultural eras and areas.” Dewey was not alluding to non-European philosophies in this instance. Rather, he was referring to the “cultural historic period and geographical area” of Western Europe, wherein modern philosophy struggled to break free from the Greek-medieval inheritance in its midst.²⁴ This is a theme that had long motivated Dewey and that dominated his thinking in the final period of his life. The essay, “Modern Philosophy” for instance, which appeared just three months after Dewey’s death, was devoted to chronicling the burdens placed on modern philosophy that were “imposed by cultural conditions of earlier periods.”²⁵

This concern was to guide what would have been Dewey’s crowning book, *Unmodern Philosophy*. For Dewey, the holdover of old assumptions in the modern period accounted for a “failure to carry the application of the standpoint and methods proper to science—in its modern sense—all the way through.”²⁶ Specifically, he meant that the failure of Western Europe to

overcome its devotion to the “fixed” and “unchanging” continued to block its assimilation of a more dynamic worldview. “What I have in mind,” he explains, “is the fact that devotion to the immutable and hence to that which could not be affected by the tooth of time nor be hemmed in by any spatial location led the philosophers in sympathy with the *new* to feel that they could strengthen it by providing an underpinning of the eternal and universal.”²⁷ As Dewey saw it, in one of the “most striking cases of confusion resulting from admixture of the old and new,” modern-era scientists, while they had begun to substitute “events” for substances, and “connections of changes” for the immutable, proceeded to theorize the former in terms of static regions and fixed laws. Modern-era philosophers were no less diverted in their undertakings. New methods of inquiry had come into their possession, but they proceeded to tangle themselves in a maze of anachronistic dualisms. Dewey referred to this unfortunate admixture of old and new as a “Wandering Between Two Worlds,” explaining that it was “wandering not so much *between* two worlds as *in* two worlds, taking our direction now from a chart of *that* world and now from a chart of *this* one.”²⁸

As Dewey saw it, the two worlds that overlapped in the modern period did not await any wholesale reconciliation into some higher unity. “What is wanted,” he wrote, “is not a ‘synthesis’ [between them] . . . but *specific* studies of intercommunication, and of blocks and arrests that have unduly exaggerated one phase of human behavior and minimized other phases.”²⁹ Dewey felt that Greek-medieval thought needed to be critically assessed so as to preserve those elements that continue to serve us well while reconstructing those elements that were blocking or arresting our intellectual growth. The argument of the book, as Dewey related to a friend, was to be that such blocks and arrests “prevented the development of a synthesis which *actually corresponds* to the vital conditions and forces of the present.”³⁰

This was the issue that occupied Dewey’s mind when the invitation to comment on the prospects for “East-West Synthesis” crossed his desk. Naturally, his first response would be “*What East?*” “*What West?*” and “*What synthesis?*” Dewey was already engaged in a comparative study of distinct cultures *within* the European tradition. The notion that there was a single “West” directly contradicted that study. As Dewey saw it, there was no integrated “West” in operation. As he wrote in his manuscript: “We [in the West] do not enjoy the benefits that would accrue from integrated organization of beliefs, either ancient or modern.”³¹ Furthermore, “synthesis” for the sake of synthesis did not interest him. It mattered greatly to Dewey that the purposes that motivated philosophical synthesis were *intelligent*. He made no secret of his own allegiances. He stood with the traditions that he deemed “scientific,” and for Dewey, “scientific” denoted practices in which “*process* is seen to be

the ‘universal’ in nature and in life,” and continuity “*the* regulative principle of *all* inquiry.”³² Scientific cultures organize themselves around on-going discoveries in the physical and biological sciences, those that are bringing process-oriented conceptions to the fore. Modern cultures will continue to lag as long as they “wander” in the pre-Darwinian, Greek-medieval world—that now antiquated land of unchanging truths, discrete substances, fixed ends, and essential natures.

Even though Dewey lost the penultimate draft of his masterwork, the thesis he had developed remained fresh in his mind in 1951. He offered *Philosophy East and West* the most constructive advice that he could in light of his current thinking. The task of East-West philosophers, he thought, should be to parse out the different strands of philosophy that world cultures had to offer, and then to establish “*specific* philosophical relationships” for intelligent purposes. While Dewey regarded certain strains of thinking to be practically incompatible—some in the Modern and Greek-medieval traditions, for instance—the more contemporary problem of incommensurability never occurred to him. Retrospectively, his critique of “cultural block universes” was an advance response to that challenge.

In preparing an argument against cultural incommensurability at the Sixth East-West Philosophers’ Conference in 1989, Richard J. Bernstein essentially remakes Dewey’s point for that purpose. Bernstein writes:

We must always strive to avoid a false essentialism when we are trying to understand the traditions to which we belong or those alien traditions that are incommensurable with “our” traditions. For frequently discussions of East-West lapse into such a false essentialism where we are seduced into thinking that there are essential determinate characteristics that distinguish the Western and Eastern “mind.” This false essentialism violently distorts the sheer complexity of overlapping traditions that cut across these artificial simplistic global notions.³³

Dewey recognized the “East/West” dichotomy as the sort of false essentialism that results from the “fallacy of intellectualism,” whereby distinctions are fashioned from concrete relations and then converted into essences that no longer stand in those relations. Such intellectualism first regards “all experiencing as a mode of knowing,” and then requires that its subject matter be reduced and transformed into self-contained objects for *episteme*.³⁴ Converted into such objects, “East” and “West” (or for that matter, “Daoism” and “Platonism,” or “Greek” and “Chinese”) become monolithic schemes that permanently house finite traits and stationary truth tables. Between such “block-like” objects,

radical incommensurability might be imagined to obtain, thus resulting in the problem of comparing them.

Such a “problem,” however, takes its place among those that exist in purely theoretical space. As David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames suggest, the persuasiveness of arguments for radical incommensurability are of the type “possessed by arguments to the effect that bumble bees cannot fly.”³⁵ When motivated by a genuine purpose, the human mind is capable of connecting anything to anything. That is among its principle functions. This helps to explain why Dewey encouraged East-West philosophers to keep the idea open and working that there are “*specific* philosophical relationships” to be discovered between cultural traditions. He thought that it was important to establish an environment in which such connections could be made as intelligent purposes arose, and he believed that *Philosophy East and West* could help us to do that.

Comparative Situations

Dewey’s recommendations in “On Philosophical Synthesis” did not accord neatly with the “Sameness/Difference” rubric that had guided comparative philosophy to that point. In fact, his vision remains a genuine alternative in a field still dominated by assessments of sameness and difference, one in which progress is attempted and then watchfully scrutinized in those terms. At this juncture, sameness and difference have become the Scylla and Charybdis through which comparative philosophers must cross. Steer too close to *sameness* and one risks what Martha C. Nussbaum calls “descriptive chauvinism,” the act of understanding what is unfamiliar by “recreating the other in the image of oneself.”³⁶ Steer too close to *difference* and one risks what Edward Slingerland calls “*neo*-Orientalism,” the claim of radical otherness.³⁷ Either transgression sinks the comparative project. Descriptive chauvinism annuls one’s claim to have made a comparison, while *neo*-Orientalism precludes one from actually making it. Those who would make philosophical comparisons must somehow chart a course between sameness and difference without succumbing to either criticism. Sailing these waters can be unforgiving, leaving one to wonder if there is any safe passage at all.

Prolific comparative philosophers like Roger T. Ames provide good case studies. Some argue that Ames reads Dewey into Chinese philosophy—the transgression of *sameness*.³⁸ Others claim that Ames believes that “the Chinese and Western philosophical traditions are essentially incommensurable”—the transgression of *difference*.³⁹ Erin M. Cline is noteworthy for criticizing Ames

from both angles, suggesting in separate discussions that he reads Dewey into Chinese philosophy (i.e., the Scylla of *sameness*) while also rendering Chinese philosophy incommensurable with Western thinking (i.e., the Charybdis of *difference*).⁴⁰ Thus, she complains of a “tension” in Ames’ work that prevents her from resolving his view into one or the other standpoint. She wishes to know “which side Ames ultimately comes down on.”⁴¹

Such binary, “Sameness/Difference” ultimatums present a genuine challenge to comparative philosophy. They expose the fact that every comparison, without exception, *must* violate the terms of sameness and difference. Zhang Xianglong regards this predicament as one that is inherent to comparative philosophy, and he addresses it in terms of a “comparison paradox” that traces back to Plato. For Plato, comparison involves detecting sameness and difference between two or more discrete objects. “A is the same size as B” expresses a comparison, and “A is larger than B” another. If one subscribes to a rigid understanding of formal properties, as Plato does, then such comparisons are paradoxical. In the first instance, the relation of “sameness” is not a relation at all. If two objects are the *same*, then we are not really talking about two objects but *one*. Accordingly, relations of sameness require relations of difference. The relation of “difference,” however, is attended by its own problems. If two things are really different, then under what category can they be held together for comparison? Zhang summarizes the resulting paradox as follows: “Any comparison will demand the *simultaneous presence* of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference.’ [But] this will negate the common measure [i.e., sameness] or the pivot of comparison [i.e., difference] . . . and thus make comparison impossible.”⁴²

Plato’s *Timaeus* describes the “World Soul” as two rings rotating in opposite directions in the heavens: the orbits of the “Same” and “Different.” Within these rings are ribbons circling in counter rotation upon which ride the sun, moon, and planets against the zodiacal firmament.⁴³ The human soul is fashioned and calibrated within these astronomical movements, thus determining its basic cognitive judgments: *Sameness* and *Difference*. These two judgments participate in the celestial operations of the “World Soul,” thereby providing the foundation for rational thought and language (*logos*). As Lloyd P. Gerson observes, in providing this account of human cognition, Plato “sees the need to incorporate principles of identity and difference into the soul’s very fabric.” The paradox of this admixture, however, haunts Plato. He finally confronts the problem directly in the *Parmenides*. Gerson explains that the cogency of Plato’s philosophy ultimately “rests upon the successful distinction of sameness and identity” in this context.⁴⁴ Whether or not Plato resolves this puzzle is a matter of debate. Regardless of how the matter is decided, however, the prevalence of Scylla and Charybdis analysis

in comparative philosophy suggests that the human mind indeed operates as Plato suggests, and that overcoming our binary judgments of “Sameness/Difference” is difficult if not impossible.

But does this mean that the act of comparison is itself impossible? As Zhang Xianglong sees it, the problem with Plato’s account of the comparison paradox is that it is negated by actual experience. Comparisons *are* possible. We make them all the time. Thus, some assumption in the comparison paradox must be wrong. Of course, the prime suspect is Plato’s assumption that “Sameness” and “Difference” are eternal forms that transcend concrete relations between particular things. As Plato sees it, comparative relations evoke “Sameness” and “Difference” *themselves*, and such universals are incompatible and cannot be instantiated in any single instance, as comparison itself requires. One might regard this as merely a semantic point, depending on how one feels about Plato. Zhang insists, however, that comparative philosophy succumbs to dangers related to the comparison paradox whenever it reports on how cultural objects *themselves* are the same or different. For such judgments always entail conceptual rigidity in the form of a universal standard that “provides common measure for the compared sides.”⁴⁵ It is always with respect to some idealized standard that such objects are regarded as either the same or as different. Regardless of whether such standards are tacit or explicit, the result is a fixed paradigm in which comparisons are made. As long as comparative philosophy generates such fixed paradigms, the two horns of the comparison paradox remain.

Zhang Xianglong’s solution to the comparison paradox is noteworthy in its own right. Most relevant for our purposes, however, is how strongly it resonates with aspects of Dewey’s own thinking on this issue. Zhang resolves the paradox by shifting attention away from the *terms* of comparison and focusing instead on what he calls the “comparative situation.” He introduces the notion with a concrete example:

When I see some dates on a high tree and several bamboo rods lying at the foot of the tree, I take the longest rod to get the dates without any kind of idealized thinking. In such an act, I successfully accomplish a comparison. The so-called “successful comparison” refers to those comparative acts that produce the meanings or have the effects that would not have appeared in unilateral or non-comparative acts. I call the structure which makes the comparison successful a “*comparative situation*.”

Zhang regards the successful comparison as one that occurs without the mediation of “idealized thinking.” Such thinking refers to the stipulation of a

fixed measure—that conceptual rigidity which invites the comparison paradox. Comparisons, Zhang argues, occur naturally enough without such interventions. When we actually compare things, we are not dealing with isolated terms in need of superordinate measures. Instead, we are simultaneously seeing A, B, and . . . “The ellipsis,” Zhang continues, “is indispensable and more important than what is explicitly said.” The ellipsis represents the situation itself, “the mechanism of meaning-production that functions in a non-universalistic and anonymous way.”⁴⁶ Such a mechanism prompts the perception of meanings or connections that would not have surfaced had that particular situation not arisen. For Zhang, the normal comparative act is a function of such situations, such that situations themselves decide the terms for comparison. When terms are instead prefigured within a fixed paradigm, comparison easily succumbs to the “comparison paradox” and becomes something other than comparison.

Dewey arrived at a similar point in his own thinking. Defining the word “Comparison” for the 1911 edition of the *Cyclopedia of Education*, he writes the following: “In the first place, since any and every object is like any other object in some conceivable regard, intelligent comparison always implies [a] specific end or purpose. We would not ordinarily compare an elephant and justice, a square and a rose, not because no points of similarity can be found, but because there is no purpose to be [served] by discovering such points.” Dewey thus understands comparison pragmatically. Comparison is an operation informed by practical ends, one whose terms and outcomes emerge in the process of doing it. He notes that pedagogically it would be absurd to ask students to identify similarities and differences between things for no purpose whatsoever—and here, Dewey stresses, any practical purpose will do: “erosion, the principle of gravitation, navigability, supply of energy for manufacturers, or whatever.”⁴⁷

Dewey is essentially in agreement with Zhang Xianglong. *Some* comparative situation must be operative if one is to make comparisons. Crucial here is not mistaking Dewey’s appeal to purposes for what Zhang calls “idealized thinking.” By introducing a practical concern such as navigation, Dewey does not mean to evoke the abstract principles of “Navigation.” Instead, he underscores his position that “active occupations should be concerned primarily with *wholes* . . . the completeness of appeal made by a situation.” For Dewey, there is no “Navigation” *itself*. Rather, there are situations that require navigation—reaching for dates with a bamboo pole, for instance. Such purposes are inseparable from whatever distinctions the situation demands. As Dewey sees it: “The unity of purpose, with the concentration upon details which it entails, confers simplicity upon the elements which have to be reckoned with in the course of action. It furnishes each with a *single* meaning according to its service in carrying on the whole enterprise.”⁴⁸

We need to consider the more elusive aspects of “situation” before understanding how this relates to comparative philosophy specifically. The “situation,” for Dewey, serves as a corrective to more atomistic versions of empiricism. We never experience discrete objects or qualities in sheer isolation as the latter suggests, but always within some contextual whole. Such wholes are “situations.” For Dewey, as for Zhang Xianglong, “situations” refer to the ontological context in which thought occurs and distinctions are made within fields that are both discursive and continuous.⁴⁹ Were there no such binding qualities to lived experience, “activity would be a meaningless hop-skip-jump affair,” Dewey writes.⁵⁰

Richard Shusterman provides the clearest and most comprehensive description of how “situations” operate in Dewey’s thinking, providing five such functions. To paraphrase Shusterman:

- 1) *Thinking is always contextual.*
The “situation” provides the context.
- 2) *Thinking identifies and employs objects.*
The “situation” determines their distinctions and relations.
- 3) *Judgment requires standards of adequacy.*
The “situation” decides what level of detail, complexity, or precision is deemed sufficient.
- 4) *Inquiry requires sustained and directional thinking.*
The “situation” provides the needed sense of unity, continuity, and direction.
- 5) *Thinking involves the association of ideas.*
The “situation” determines which associations are relevant.⁵¹

Thus described, the “situation” is elusive by nature. Operative situations cannot become “objects” of thought, for they *establish* the objects of thought. As Dewey puts it: “a quart bowl cannot be held within itself,” meaning that a situation cannot become an element in a proposition the terms of which it is setting.⁵² As Philip W. Jackson notes, “As soon as we begin to offer a description of the situation we are in, we have exited that situation (by transforming it into an object) and entered another one.”⁵³

Shusterman warns that by postulating “situations” Dewey risks sliding into a “foundational metaphysics of presence,” but that the slide is avoidable because “[Dewey] provides the means to avoid it.”⁵⁴ Thoughts and actions for Dewey are shaped by the habits, purposes, and needs of organisms-in-

environments. That ought to be the final analysis. As Shusterman sees it, introducing the term “situation” as a quality *uniting* such factors adds nothing to their descriptions. While I see the point, I am less concerned than Shusterman about “situations” and more willing to allow Dewey his terminology—letting it stand for whatever tertiary features permit the intersection of such habits, purposes, and needs in particular environments. In chapter 3, such features (treated in terms of “Thirdness”) will be taken up in a more detailed manner when we consider the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. For present purposes, the important point is that such operations have phases that routinely occur below the level of consciousness. These phases can become objects of conscious thought when the situation changes.

Dewey is well aware that it is difficult to give a positive, non-reifying account of what a “situation” actually is. He suggests that the term is most readily indicated by a negative statement: “What is designated by the word ‘situation’ is *not* a single object or event or set of objects and events. For we never experience nor form judgments about objects and events in isolation, but only in connection with a contextual whole. This latter is what is called ‘situation.’”⁵⁵ Situations, as such, are ubiquitous: “To live in a world [is to] live in a series of situations.”⁵⁶ As Sing-nan Fen explains, “We live in one situation after another, [and] even this *afterness* is in a situation, not between situations.”⁵⁷ For Dewey, while present situations cannot become objects of thought within themselves, situations can do so “in connection with some *other* situation to which thought now refers,” just as a quart bowl might be “contained in another bowl.”⁵⁸ When this occurs, one becomes conscious of how certain habits, purposes, and needs intersect and give rise to particular sets of objects, associations, inferences, comparisons, etc. Such connections had not been objects for thought in the prior “situation.”

Criticism in comparative philosophy relies almost entirely on such transpositions. Scylla and Charybdis analyses surface only when comparisons made in situation (A) become terms in situation (B), such that propositions made about them in (B) also contain (A) as a term. In other words, specific comparisons are exposed to scrutiny under “Sameness/Difference” categories only *after* they have been made in whatever “situation” decided those terms. Typically, the situations undergoing transposition are those of other comparative philosophers.

Again, Roger T. Ames provides a good example. Ames’ broader oeuvre focuses on how tacit assumptions shape the way that others read the Chinese tradition. By “assumptions,” Ames means “those usually unannounced premises held by the members of an intellectual culture or tradition that make communication possible by constituting a ground from which philosophical

discourse proceeds.”⁵⁹ The fact that Ames has his *own* assumptions animates critics like Eske Møllgaard, who point out how “ironic” it is that Ames’ work “falls into the very trap it rightly advises others to avoid.”⁶⁰ Ames critiques those in situation (A) from his own situation (B). Møllgaard then criticizes situation (B) from his own situation (C). The point here is that such critical transpositions have no natural terminus. Sing-nan Fen understood Dewey’s insights into this dynamic particularly well. The idea is that any “one universe [of discourse] may be a term of discourse in another universe,” and provide “criteria with which to criticize any specific universe of discourse.” Meanwhile, at each point in the process, one’s own universe of discourse is “traceless”—it resolves invisibly into its own background “like a solution of salt and water.”⁶¹

This is why comparative philosophers are inordinately busy directing their criticisms toward one another, such that, as Robert W. Smid observes, “It would seem that setting oneself up as an exemplar for comparative philosophy is not limited to any particular approach to comparison but is rather endemic to the task of comparative philosophy itself.”⁶² Given how comparative situations operate, we never see the ground of our comparative judgments as we make them. We are thus guaranteed to notice the speck in our neighbor’s eye before recognizing the plank in our own.

As Mark Johnson explains, Dewey’s description of how situations operate in human cognition is more than just idle speculation. “There is empirical evidence from brain science suggesting that Dewey was correctly describing the process of a developing thought,” reports Johnson, “which moves from felt pervasive quality [a situation] to higher-level conceptual discrimination and inference.” The core-shell architecture of the human brain ensures that the more densely connected, core limbic system is already active beneath the higher neocortical regions that are responsible for abstract and discriminative judgments, such as those ascribing “Sameness/Difference” to objects. Instincts, emotions, and drives invariably establish the situation in which such judgments occur. As Johnson maintains, the architecture of the brain “[makes] sense of Dewey’s claim that our experience always begins with a pervasive unifying quality of a whole situation, within which we then discriminate objects, with their properties and relations to one another.”⁶³

This being the case, a rare degree of humility and self-awareness is required of comparative philosophers. John H. Berthrong states the matter plainly: “One must start *somewhere* in the task of making comparisons and, if we are honest, we will confess that we start from where we ourselves are.”⁶⁴ Comparative assertions and critiques are always embedded in pre-reflective situations, and these situations include the cultural, biographical, and temperamental profiles of those who do the work.

This dynamic, while an impediment to self-criticism, does not entirely rule it out. For Dewey, the more that we become aware of our own “situations,” the better able we are to achieve what he regarded as one of the central objectives of philosophy: the “critique of prejudices.” While we never completely rid ourselves of our own prejudices, such reflection can result in a kind of “intellectual disrobing.” As Dewey explains: “We cannot permanently divest ourselves of the intellectual habits we take on and wear when we assimilate the culture of our own time and place. But intelligent furthering of culture demands that we take some of them off, that we inspect them critically to see what they are made of and what wearing them does to us.”⁶⁵

Culture and the Comparative Philosopher

These considerations take on special significance with respect to Dewey’s project in *Unmodern Philosophy*. On the one hand, the project was an attempt to uncover certain “principles” of Greek-medieval and Modern cultures, with the express purpose of arguing that we needed to overcome the former principles. Generating complexity, however, was Dewey’s implicit acknowledgment that “principles” were also guiding the kind of work that *he* was doing in his treatment of the cultural material. As Dewey writes:

The philosopher is first and last a human being with his own intellectual and emotional habits who is involved in a concrete scene having its own color of tradition . . . A *contemporary* philosopher . . . comes to his work, protected and perhaps muffled by an immense intervening apparatus. He carries in his head a vast body of distinctions previously made . . . the two variables: himself as a thinker and the cultural material thought about, are insofar technalized, if I may venture the word, for him in advance.

Such considerations, Dewey suggests, “reach deeper than the particular interpretation [here] offered,” which even in its “bare outline,” affords recognition of “the underlying conditions of philosophy.”⁶⁶

In the culminating chapter of *Unmodern Philosophy*, “Experience as Life-Function,” we learn what Dewey is talking about. He had indicated elsewhere that phrases such as “life-function” would be implicated in his transition from “experience” to “culture.” In the crowning chapter of his lost work, he would make the transition.⁶⁷ In the final decade of his life, Dewey was preparing to identify the “critical and constructive effort [that] constitutes philosophy” with four newly developed postulates. What follows is a paraphrase:

1. *Experience* is a synonym for *life-functions*.
2. *Life-functions*, as here used, means *human living*, which is *sociocultural*.
3. *Psychology* is concerned with *human behavior* in the above respects.
4. *Experience*, as defined above, is the means or agency for the constructive projection of *sociocultural* activities for systematic criticism.

That this constitutes “philosophy,” Dewey writes, “is not so much a separate postulate as it is the focal point of the four postulates just set down.”⁶⁸ As the sequence of postulates suggests, experience is both what human life *is* and what it *does*. Dewey intended here to establish “culture” as the overarching context in which this obtains.

In this connection, philosophy, like experience, takes on a “genetic-functional” character. It is both situated *in* a culture as well as being the critical and constructive mode *of* that culture. The term “genetic-functional” is one that Dewey had previously used in his review of Alfred North Whitehead’s philosophy. On that occasion, he identifies genetic-functional operations with the inherently active nature of situations.⁶⁹ He stresses a similar dynamic in *Unmodern Philosophy*, explaining that “what goes before—a genetic reference—and what comes after, a functioning reference,” but *not* a distinction that is discretely sequenced—rather, one that is “inherently temporal and temporally continuous.”⁷⁰

The “genetic-functional” category is a subtle one. Dewey struggles to formulate it with clarity in his late-period writings. In unpublished papers, he is keen to distinguish it from what is commonly referred to as the “genetic method”—i.e., the history of how we have arrived at our understanding of some subject matter. Rather, Dewey means for it to indicate an “understanding of continuity in the subject matter investigated.”⁷¹ In *Unmodern Philosophy* he explains that: “In short, the phrase ‘genetic-functional method’ is a way of indicating, first, that philosophic inquiry gets ahead by placing the material of its problems in a *context*, and secondly, of announcing that this context consists of the material of prior and subsequent life-functions as interactivities.” Also: “The method is *genetic* in that it attempts to place the subject matter dealt with in the context of the conditions under which it comes into existence . . . [and it] is *functional* in that it indicates what the factual subject matter under examination *does* specifically when it comes into existence.”⁷²

Another way to approach this is to reflect again on the role of the “philosopher” as Dewey now understands it. Philosophical inquiry is behavior that emerges in the context of life-functions: cultural, biographical, temperamental, etc. For human beings, this entails a *sociocultural* situation that is part of a temporal continuum (i.e., “genetic”). Once philosophy begins, however, its “two variables,” the philosopher and the cultural material treated, become “technalized” in that context (i.e., “functional”). One is *trying* to do something and philosophical subject matter is taken up instrumentally in the attempt. Such activity is holistic—for as Dewey sees it, “consideration of genetic processes and of functions cannot be separated from each other.”⁷³ Philosophical activity consists irreducibly of *some* one doing *some* thing *some* where for *some* reason. Such operative situations (i.e., “quart bowls”) of philosophy cannot themselves become transparent objects of thought as we are in them. However, given the temporally continuous nature of genetic-functional activity, we are able to perform such observations as we *move* from situation to situation, and this is what makes progress in philosophy possible.

This has major implications for cross-cultural philosophical research. Whereas to *study* another philosophical tradition involves acquaintance with the “situations which have to do with problems that have played an influential part in the history of [that] philosophical discourse,” to *be* a philosopher is simultaneously to be “involved in a concrete scene having its own color of tradition,” one that conditions the way in which such cultural material is being apprehended. There is no method by which to avoid this “double-barreled” condition. Philosophy, given its genetic-functional nature, is both *shaping* and *shaped by* the situations in which it operates along with other life-functions on a temporal continuum. With reference to experience, Dewey explains what this means for philosophical discourse:

“Experience” as the most inclusive category of philosophical discourse is a warning that every distinction and relation that figures needs to be placed where it emerges in the set and system of ongoing life-functions and with respect to the way it operates in this connection. In its comprehensive function, *experience* denotes organic-environmental interactivity, and as a “double-barreled” term, [it stands] for both modes of *experiencing* and that which is *experienced* . . .

From this standpoint, Dewey finds it “almost beyond belief” that anyone who knows much about the history of Western philosophy would regard its material as open to “uncolored and uncoloring inspection or introspection

and report.⁷⁴ He would find it equally if not more unbelievable that Western comparative philosophers would consider the objects of *non*-Western philosophies to be available for such neutral consideration. By now, it must be understood that, as genetic-functional activity, philosophy is a *product* of cultural conditions even as it *produces* its interpretations of cultural materials. Because the overarching context for this is “culture,” that term was set to replace “experience” in Dewey’s thinking.

It is fascinating that Dewey held such a position, complete but unexpressed, when he wrote his comments for *Philosophy East and West*. This places them in an entirely new light and again underscores how forward-looking they were. Dewey’s article speaks, in fact, more directly to issues facing comparative philosophers *today* than to issues that concerned his readers in 1951.

The field, for instance, currently grapples with what is called the “third of comparison” (*tertium comparationis*) and how it functions in the act of comparison. Ralph Weber contributes the most to articulating the scope of this problem. Weber argues that every act of comparison, be it similarity, family resemblance, analogy, or something else, is informed by a *tertium* that enables comparison to occur. “The third of comparison,” he argues, plays a crucial role “in the *determination* of the *comparata* which one then sets out to compare in one or another respect.”⁷⁵ As an example, Weber uses the comparison of *Mengzi* 孟子 and *Xunzi* 荀子 on the topic of “human nature.” In order to establish such a comparison, one must already identify the *comparata* as “two” of something, and that could mean any number of things: *two* Confucians, *two* philosophers, *two* texts, *two* theories, and the list goes on. As Dewey remarks, “There are as many meanings of identity and identification as there are types of operations by which they are determined.”⁷⁶ Each type of identification influences the range of possible conclusions that a comparison might result in. As Weber observes, comparative philosophers “are not very strict when it comes to specifying the ‘pre-comparative’ *tertium* of their *comparata*,” and thus seldom discuss how such choices influence their results.

Comparative philosophy generally regards “culture” itself as a *tertium*. In comparisons of Greek and Chinese thought, for instance, it is usually assumed that Greece and China are two “cultures” and that, as such, they will produce two “philosophies” (now a double assertion). On the basis of representing “two” of these things, Greek and Chinese thought can be compared. Weber observes that, “Any double assertion of cultural and philosophical difference hence presupposes a *tertium* in the sense that both *comparata* are said to be ‘cultures with a philosophy of their own’ (or to be relatable to such a notion). It remains to be determined in each such comparative study what precisely is understood by the terms ‘culture’ and ‘philosophy.’” Weber raises a number of provocative points here. He adds another in observing that: “The problematic

of the *tertium* leads one to the role of the person who makes the comparison,” meaning “[there are] *purposes* that go into comparisons, and focusing on the problematic of the *tertium* might be helpful to make clear just what purpose is at play.”⁷⁷

With reference to Weber’s concerns, Dewey’s approach in *Unmodern Philosophy* is remarkable in at least two respects. First, there is little question as to Dewey’s purpose. He states clearly that his intention is to draw a comparison between certain aspects of the Greek-medieval and Modern “worlds” in order to critique the continuing influence of the former. Second, over the course of executing his comparison, Dewey recognizes and openly constructs the categories of “culture” and “philosophy” that both genetically furnish—and functionally operate—as his *tertium*. He thereby implies within his argument that its philosophical subject matter is already conditioned by the cultural situation in which it is set.

This makes Dewey’s approach in *Unmodern Philosophy* something other than comparative philosophy. Had his comments in *Philosophy East and West* been understood in this context, it might have been recognized that Dewey was not really advocating cross-cultural comparison at all, but rather something more “intra-cultural” in nature. The phrase “intra-cultural philosophy” more clearly announces that its own activities occur *within* the cultural matrix, and that its own genetic-functional character conditions the *tertium* of its own comparisons. “Culture,” for Dewey, is the source of every *tertium*. It stands for the developing situations in which comparisons are made and in which their results become amenable to our purposes. The phrase “comparative philosophy” leaves room for the false impression that one can step outside of culture and reflect on cultural objects from an un-biased position for *no* reason whatsoever, which violates the genetic-functional nature of philosophy itself. By including a more explicit reference to culture in its own self-description, “intra-cultural philosophy” stands a better chance of remaining aware of its own nature and purpose—of “knowing what it’s about,” as Dewey liked to say.

The reasoning behind “On Philosophical Synthesis” now makes better sense. Since every operation of comparison and synthesis is undertaken for some reason, Dewey refuses to endorse either “comparison” or “synthesis” as a general goal and speaks instead of “*specific* philosophical relationships.” His point is that it is easier to reflect intelligently on what is done for a specific purpose rather than allow such generic activities to masquerade as ends-in-themselves. Meanwhile, Dewey’s critique of “cultural block universes” indicates his desire to liberate cultural elements from fixed sets (or *tertium*) that would limit their potential to serve instrumentally in other connections. Dewey anticipated that intra-cultural philosophy would change over time as cultural needs and interests changed. Important to remember in this connection is

that, while cultural elements can be synthesized “in isolation,” “*none* of these elements—in the East or in the West—is in isolation,” but rather “all interwoven in a vast variety of ways in the historico-cultural process.”⁷⁸ The act of isolating, comparing, and synthesizing cultural objects, Dewey realized, was an act that proceeded from within culture already—and since cultural situations change, so too will our understanding of the world’s philosophical heritage.

Restored now to its proper context alongside Dewey’s late-period work, this inaugural statement in *Philosophy East and West* can be regarded as a still-unrealized vision of what “intra-cultural philosophy” might look like. It is a vision that was ahead of its time in 1951, but perhaps one whose time has come.

Experiments in Intra-cultural Philosophy

That “On Philosophical Synthesis” can be read as “paving the way toward some important developments in intercultural philosophy” is recognized by Lenart Škof, whose recent work puts Dewey to good use in furthering “intercultural philosophy” as practiced in contemporary continental and Indian philosophical circles.⁷⁹ The “intra-cultural philosophy” developed here is distinct from this tradition. As presently envisioned, intra-cultural philosophy is original to and co-extensive with the American tradition. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who engaged with Chinese, Indian, and Islamic philosophies, lies within its lineage. William James’ interest in Buddhism and his treatment of Swami Vivekananda are included. Works in the “pragmatist and process traditions” in comparative philosophy, as outlined by Robert W. Smid, are important expressions in this lineage.⁸⁰ The latter are sophisticated examples of intra-cultural philosophy in its more refined, methodological and comparative form, one closely associated with the history of the East-West Philosophers’ Conferences.

In the present sense, however, intra-cultural philosophy embraces more than just what professional philosophers have done. As essentially pragmatic and inclusive in its orientation, it does not exclude cultural figures whose credentials are more eclectic. It matters not from what quarters Gary Snyder, Thomas Merton, or John Cage gained their insights into non-Western philosophies. *Passion may have whispered it or accident suggested it.* Their contributions still push the total drift of American culture toward greater assimilation of non-Western traditions, and such legacies matter. Such figures are not to be arbitrarily excluded from what is here regarded as “intra-cultural philosophy.”

As broad as the present designation is, however, its relationship with analytic philosophy is somewhat complex. In the postwar period, classical American and non-Western philosophical traditions suffered simultaneous