

John Dewey and Intra-cultural Naturalism

When we speak of human nature we do not refer to the idle logomachies about the inherent goodness or innately evil nature of humans, but rather to objective study of observable human behavior and scientifically derived hypotheses about its changing trends . . . On the basis of these findings we devise our approaches to and methods for solving human problems.

—John Dewey, National Peking University, November 1919

Dissolving the Blank Slate

Confucius taught that, “Human beings are similar in their natures, but vary with respect to their cultural practices (*xi* 習).”¹ In this, the Master was essentially correct. It is also said that Confucius formulated no doctrine (*yan* 言) about our natures.² In this, the Master was equally wise. Given the sheer number of shared human traits, coherent doctrines of “human nature” (*renxing* 人性) can only be assembled selectively, and once taken up into verbal formulation (*yan* 言) they are destined to become instruments of culture as much as any account of human nature. This is what happens in China, most famously in debates over whether human nature is “good” (*shan* 善) or “bad” (*e* 惡).

Such “idle logomachies,” as Dewey calls them, work well in introductory Philosophy courses, but we know that the facts are not that simple. As Donald E. Brown argues (not un-controversially), there are at least hundreds of human traits that “comprise those features of culture, society, language, behavior, and psyche for which there are no known exception.”³ Brown’s list includes: conflict, play, music, weapons, revenge, jokes, envy, rape, empathy, insults, hope, dominance/submission, cooperation, pride, sexual attraction, ethnocentrism, morality, male coalitional violence, gift giving, economic inequality, retaliation, fear of snakes, and the list goes on.⁴ From such a list, one might classify a “good” or “bad” set of traits and call that “human nature” on solid empirical grounds (“classification,” and “good/bad distinctions,” by

the way, are also on Brown's list of universals). The more important point is that, as soon as such theories (*yan* 言) become objects of debate, the discussion becomes more about the desirability of certain cultural practices than it does about any shared human nature. Dewey thought that it was important to have such debates. Empirical facts about human nature, he believed, were necessary to make them more intelligent (*ming* 明).

The present chapter explores how our shared human nature relates to intra-cultural philosophy specifically. Chapter 1 of the previous volume, *John Dewey and Daoist Thought*, developed intra-cultural philosophy as an alternative to the more conventional notion of "comparative philosophy." The argument there was that philosophy is genetic-functional in nature—both situated *in* a culture as well as being the critical and constructive mode *of* that culture. Thus, philosophical assertions, comparisons, and inquiries are always culturally situated. This being the case, philosophical comparisons are never made from some standpoint *outside* of culture, meaning that intra-cultural engagements are necessarily "interwoven in a vast variety of ways in the historico-cultural process."⁵ Dewey's inaugural essay in *Philosophy East and West*, "On Philosophical Synthesis," indicates not only where he thought global philosophy should go as a result, but also where he was going with his own philosophy—engaged as he was in a transition between "experience" and "culture." As fate would have it, Dewey's declining health prevented him from fully completing his "cultural turn" and articulating an intra-cultural philosophy of his own.

That turn, however, was not as abrupt as it might seem. As early as 1938, within the pages of *Logic: A Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey had his preliminary theory of culture already in place. Thus, in its broader context, Dewey's statement in *Philosophy East and West* is part of a final, culminating insight that marked his final period. In order to appreciate this, one can begin with 1938's *Logic*, follow Dewey's thinking up through the 1940s (as he wrote and then lost his masterwork, *Unmodern Philosophy*), and then terminate with his visit to Hawai'i in 1951. In tracing this trajectory, the present chapter will serve as a companion to the opening chapter of volume one. The latter considered the difference between intra-cultural philosophy and comparative philosophy primarily from a methodological standpoint. The present chapter focuses more on how intra-cultural philosophy relates to Dewey's late period cultural naturalism. For as Sing-nan Fen notes, it was because Dewey's outlook was "naturalistic [that] his philosophy was cut out to be intercultural" and "had the potentiality of transcending the so-called Western tradition."⁶ In what follows, we examine how this is so.

We can begin by distinguishing Dewey's "cultural" approach from its so-called "postmodern" alternative. Since intra-cultural philosophy is genetic-functional in nature, i.e., always *in* and *of* a particular culture, it would be

reasonable to ask whether intra-cultural philosophers are destined in all cases to reduce other cultures to their own cultural categories. As intra-cultural philosophers, are we not trapped within our own “prison houses of culture,” with no direct access to other cultures unmediated by our own sociocultural situations? If this is so, then it might make our approach similar to that of the “postmodern relativist,” a figure whom Edward Slingerland associates with the following philosophical tendencies:

[An] approach to the study of culture that assumes that humans are fundamentally linguistic-cultural beings, and that our experience of the world is therefore mediated by language and/or culture *all the way down*. That is, we have no direct cognitive access to reality, and things in the world are meaningful to us only through the filter of linguistically or culturally mediated preconceptions. Inevitable corollaries of this stance are a strong linguistic-cultural relativism, epistemological skepticism, and a “blank slate” view of human nature: we are nothing until inscribed by the discourse into which we are socialized, and therefore nothing significant about the way in which we think or act is a direct result of our biological endowment.⁷

Slingerland’s concerns echo those expressed by Steven Pinker in his work, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, which also projects the “postmodern” as one who vehemently rejects “the possibility of meaning, knowledge, progress, and shared cultural values,” basing their ideas on “a false theory of human psychology, the Blank Slate,” thus maintaining that “[everything] in perceptual experience is a learned social construction.”⁸

Philosophers who align themselves with Dewey read Pinker’s *The Blank Slate* with a mixture of consent and befuddlement. Our *consent* lies in the fact that Dewey also accepts the reality of shared human traits and values. As he says, “There is a constitution common to all normal individuals. They have the same hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; they are fed with the same foods, hurt by the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same remedies, warmed and cooled by the same variations in climate.”⁹ The environment presents human experience with a common set of conditions: e.g., “that certain things are foods, that they are to be found in certain places, that water drowns, fire burns, that sharp points penetrate and cut, that heavy things fall unless supported, that there is a certain regularity in the changes of night and day and the alternation of hot and cold, wet and dry.”¹⁰ Dewey rejects “blank slate” theories because they “slur over the fact that the environment involves a personal sharing in common experiences.”¹¹ He

regards blank slate empiricism to be an “anachronism [given] the demonstration of the number and variety [of] instinctive non-acquired tendencies.”¹²

Our *befuddlement* lies in the fact that Pinker can write a 400+ page book on this topic and not mention Dewey even once. Given Pinker’s historical account, this is an egregious oversight. In the twentieth century, he argues, “behaviorist minimalism” eclipsed William James’ “rich psychology,” while the cultural reductionism of anthropologists such as Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, for whom “culture is autonomous from biology,” replaced the more balanced approach of their teacher, Franz Boas.¹³ Both statements are true. James and Boas, however, were major influences on Dewey, and under such influences Dewey (who was more prolific than James and Boas combined) spent half a century developing the kind of biologically grounded theory of culture that Pinker says we must now begin to formulate.¹⁴

Throughout his writings, Dewey never once doubts the presence of shared, native, pre-linguistic instincts and functions in the human experience. His main point is always that *biological heredity does not predetermine future use*, and on this he remains remarkably consistent. Heredity, as Dewey sees it, “means neither more nor less than the original endowment of an individual.” To regard such an endowment as predetermining future use is a “misuse of the idea of heredity.” For Dewey, environment always has a role to play in settling the eventual expression of one’s native tendencies. The human being, for instance, is endowed at birth with the equipment for speaking language—but “if the sounds which he makes occur in a medium of persons speaking the Chinese language, the activities which make like sounds will be selected and coordinated.”¹⁵

Along more philosophical lines, Dewey focuses on breaking down the “Nature/Culture” dualism altogether, arguing that the operations of the former are always continuous with their expressions in the latter. “It is at least as true,” he writes, “that the state of culture determines the order and arrangement of native tendencies as that human nature produces any particular set or system of social phenomena so as to obtain satisfaction for itself.” He continues: “These statements do not signify that biological heredity and native individual differences are of no importance. They signify that as they operate within a given social form, they are shaped and take effect *within* that particular form.”¹⁶ For Dewey, our shared biological background is what makes culture possible, serving as the operative *limit* to our cultural situations. “Otherwise,” he says, “everything would go wrong—higgledy-piggledy that is.”¹⁷

While it is true that mental and linguistic features uniquely characterize all cultural-level experiences, such features do not go “all the way down” as they would for the so-called “postmodern relativist.” For Dewey, biological-level experiences such as “hunger,” and he expands this list to include “fear,

sexual love, gregariousness, sympathy, parental love, love of bossing and of being ordered about, imitation, etc.,” do not express elements or forces that are “psychic or mental in their first intention.” In first accounting for such experiences, one turns to “physics, chemistry and physiology rather than to psychology.” The result of such analysis reveals not the variability of our natural tendencies (or *xing* 性) but the contingent status of their cultural expressions. In the case of something like fear, there is no single *psychological* species of that emotion, no “one fear having diverse manifestations,” Dewey writes. There are different kinds of fear, and there are diverse sociocultural triggers for fear-like experiences. Empirical observation reveals, however, that they “all have certain physical organic acts in common—those of organic shrinkage, gestures of hesitation and retreat.”¹⁸

Such common physiological operations are taken up differently in different sociocultural situations. The same can be said for faculties such as memory, attention, and perception, the objects of which are developed in a social environment. Thus, as Dewey observes, “The faculty of memory is developed in one way in China, and in another way in the United States.”¹⁹ Accordingly, such operations become valued differently. The experience of fear in moment “X,” for instance, might be regarded as intelligent in some societies but cowardly in others. Lunar eclipses were objects of dread in premodern societies, whereas today most people feel fortunate to witness one. So, while the basic physiology of “fear” in humans is the same, occasions for fear and its cultural expression become diversified as human communities evolve. As Mark Johnson observes, “Although cultures will share many values because of commonalities of our bodies and the recurring features of the environments we inhabit, *value pluralism* is an inescapable fact of the human condition.”²⁰ Another way of saying this is to repeat what Confucius already said: “Human beings are similar in their natures (*xing* 性), but vary with respect to their cultural practices (*xi* 習).”²¹

Dewey’s classic statement on the relationship between biological- and cultural-level experiences appears in his *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. It is here that Dewey introduces the phrase “cultural naturalism” to describe his position. The central term in Dewey’s treatment is *continuity*. “The idea of continuity is not self-explanatory,” he writes—“its meaning excludes complete rupture on one side and mere repetition of identities on the other; it precludes reduction of the ‘higher’ to the ‘lower’ just as it precludes complete breaks and gaps. The growth and development of any living organism from seed to maturity illustrates the meaning of continuity.” In Dewey’s nondualistic and nonreductive approach, “rational [or human-level] operations *grow out of* organic activities, without being identical with that from which they emerge.”²²

Thus understood, culture constitutes neither break nor gap within nature. Rather, it constitutes the growth of complexity *within* nature, a growth that results in properties non-identical to those exhibited prior to its development. While the development of culture at the species-level correlates to emergent properties in human brain function over several millions of years, Dewey suggests that the principle of continuity exhibited in its growth is the same principle as that observed in the evolution of any living species that exhibits new functions and properties over time. Dewey's objective, in the *Logic* and elsewhere, is to overcome the association of nature with the purely physical, and to establish that culture is equally natural in that it both *conditions* and is *conditioned by* that which is purely physical. As he puts it, his position is that "mental phenomena represent life-functions of a physiological order transformed by interaction with social conditions involving language and its cultural products."²³

The challenge is to render this position coherent without succumbing to either dualism or reductionism. "To a very large extent," Dewey writes, "the ways in which human beings respond even to physical conditions are influenced by their cultural environment." In such environments, he explains, "physical conditions are modified by the complex of customs, traditions, occupations, interests and purposes which envelop them." Dewey is not suggesting that human beings cannot experience the purely physical, "but the occasions in which a human being responds to things as merely physical in purely physical ways are comparatively rare." Here, he offers the examples of jumping at a sudden noise, withdrawing one's hand at the feeling of heat, and our "animal-like basking in sunshine" (alluded to in chapter 7 of volume one). Such a list could be extended indefinitely. The point is that such "raw" experiences are normally taken up on the plane of human meaning as soon as they register as experiences. It is the *rusty old truck* that suddenly backfires, the *chain restaurant coffee* that burns my hand, and the *well-earned vacation* that makes basking in the sunshine so grand. Who really knows how often the *purely* physical is experienced? Dewey imagines that one would have to observe a person all day to determine which experiences are purely physical and which are enveloped in cultural meaning. His guess is that, "the result would show how thoroughly saturated behavior is with conditions and factors that are of cultural origin and import."²⁴

The drafts of Dewey's lost manuscript indicate that his thinking in the 1940s remained consistent with *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. Important developments, however, can be observed both in the 1949 "Re-Introduction" to *Experience and Nature* and in the aforementioned manuscript. In the 1949 "Re-Introduction," Dewey further explains his decision to replace the term "experience" with "culture" as follows: "The limitation of the expression

‘experience and nature’ is overcome by the more generalized statement that the *standing problem* of Western philosophy throughout its entire history has been the connection-and-distinction of what on one side is regarded as *human* and on the other side as *natural*.²⁵

This is a key statement, because the bilateral relation of “connection-and-distinction” between *human*-level phenomena and *natural*-level phenomena is what “culture” finally comes to mean for Dewey. The hyphen in the phrase “connection-and-distinction,” as Dewey sees it, is something that “stands for inherent connection, in *both* directions, between what the two terms stand for.”²⁶ Culture would come to replace “experience” because the latter word, in Dewey’s estimation, remained tainted by “the spirit of the post-medieval period,” where it represented the “human” element of philosophical subject matter in contrast to an ostensible “natural” element. The assumption that “experience,” so understood, provides a “sure standard of judgment by which to determine the status of everything else,” explains why “[modern] philosophies purporting to be philosophies of experience [were] so unable to deal effectively with experience.” By foregrounding “culture,” i.e., the life-functions that operate in ongoing “connection-and-distinction” between the human-and-natural, Dewey hoped to prevent erroneous conceptions of “experience” from being read into his position. The move was meant to *preserve* what experience actually stood for in Dewey’s thinking.

The switch, he thought, would help to liberate philosophy from its parochial association with early modern forms of “experience” and to re-envision it as an activity inclusive of cultural-level experience and its diversity. This is how it was to serve within the larger framework of the “cultural turn.” The present term “intra-cultural” is meant to register the fact that philosophical activity, while comprehensive as human activity within shared conditions, is always culturally situated and thus variable. As Dewey explains:

To hold that the scope of philosophy is comprehensive, inclusive, in the sense that philosophy, whatever the time and place, is always concerned with the *connection-and-distinction* of the *human* and the *natural*, is in effect to deny that it is comprehensive in the sense that it is identical in content at all times and places. It is to deny that the scope of philosophy can be stated in terms once and for all as it could be if philosophy were independent of time and place . . . entirely unaffected by the changes in human events, including those that occur in the science of nature as well as in other cultural activities and conditions, aesthetic, industrial, political, etc.²⁷

Philosophy, as a genetic-functional activity situated *within* a culture as well as being the critical and constructive mode *of* that culture, changes focus as cultural conditions evolve. Rather than risk the misunderstanding that philosophy deals in some perennial way with reconstructing human-level experience *vis-à-vis* an external “nature,” Dewey decided to just drop the word “experience” and replace it with “culture,” thus underscoring the evolving nature of philosophy *and* experience within the framework of his cultural naturalism.

This was an important shift in vocabulary, but not a revolution in core thinking. The touchstones would remain continuity and nondualism, with the “great harm” being done when distinctions “entirely genetic-functional” were “erected into a difference of kinds of existence.” This would remain Dewey’s approach in his lost manuscript. While illustrating the nature of the “Material/Ideal” distinction, for instance, Dewey summarizes his final position as follows: “[The main point] is that culture, by and in its own nature, is a union of qualities and traits which, when discriminated in inquiry and discourse, are respectively called material and non-material.”²⁸ This is another way of saying that “culture” stands for the underlying continuity of elements that we identify as exclusively “human” or “natural” in specialized discourse.

In the tenth and longest chapter, “Mind and Body,” Dewey provides an extensive account of what in *Experience and Nature* is called the “body-mind,” only now considered within a larger sociocultural context. As Pierre Steiner observes, readers “will not find [in this chapter] *totally new* elements concerning the status of mental phenomena in Dewey’s philosophy.”²⁹ What was to be Dewey’s final statement on “body-mind” remains consistent with what he wrote in earlier treatments, only now he places even more stress on the sociocultural factors. In describing the continuity between mental and physical phases of experience, Dewey now notes that: “the ‘monism’ involved is not of a metaphysical sort but consists simply of recognition that the phenomena in question are behavioral in nature,” which is to say they are socioculturally situated as “life-functions.”³⁰

This, again, is a significant statement for Dewey. Recall that he intends for “life-functions” to serve as a comprehending category that includes both the physical “body” as well as the extra-physical “self.” As we learned in chapter 7 of volume one, Dewey considered the absence of such a single, comprehensive term to be an intellectual travesty; for the category that eludes us stands precisely for “human life.” As we then saw, the Chinese term *shen* 身 can stand for “body,” “self,” and “person” all at the same time. Dewey complains, however, that in English, “we have no word by which to name mind-body in a unified wholeness of operation. For if we said ‘human life’ few would recognize that it is precisely the unity of mind and body in action to which we were referring.”³¹

With respect to “human life,” culture (and thus philosophy) for Dewey represents ongoing activities concerned with the “connection-and-distinction” between things human (e.g., “minds”) and natural (e.g., “bodies”) always in response to special problems or other social purposes. Over the course of such operations, there is no ontological distinction between *human*-level and *natural*-level phenomena. Only functional distinctions obtain. But now, every functional distinction indicates a sociocultural situation. Thus, Dewey writes:

It follows that the subject matter of philosophy is social when it uses such words as “mind,” “mental,” “sensations,” “ideas” . . . [that when] used in analysis and description, stand for life-activities or behavioral events in which the environmental interacting partner can be said to be *physical* only in consequence of an analysis in which qualifying social conditions are deliberately dropped out, because of the nature of the special problem then and there dealt with.

The principle that there is no “mental” without a deliberate, social decision to drop out what is “physical” applies both ways. For as Dewey adds: “The very notion of a ‘world’ which is physical and nothing but physical is itself a product of social factors.”³²

While arriving at this position, Dewey also arrives at what is perhaps his keenest insight into Chinese philosophy. In his unfinished drafts of the 1949 “Re-Introduction,” he suggests that the Chinese tradition is better positioned to understand the continuity of the “human” and the “natural” by virtue of having already identified and overcome “the constant and unifying problem of Western philosophy throughout its whole career,” namely “the relation [by] way of distinction-and-connection of what at a given period and in a given area has been taken [up as] *natural* on one side and as *human* on the other.”³³ Dewey writes:

[This] is not intended to exclude [Chinese] philosophy from the scope of the statement about the enduring and unifying problem of philosophy as it develops at different times in diverse cultural areas. As a matter of fact, it is my impression that those who created [Chinese] philosophy have been [more] steadily aware that the problem with which they were concerned is of the kind just stated than have the Westerners, who have been so preoccupied with the then-and-there urgent phase of the problem as not to have seen the forest because of the trees right about them.³⁴

Dewey is remarkably astute in observing this. As explained in volume one, the “continuity between Nature and the human” (*tianrenheyi* 天人合一) will emerge as a key assumption in Confucian thought. It would go on to become perhaps *the* central tenant in the tradition and will account for many of the parallels between Dewey’s thought and Confucian thinking explored in this volume.

In the final analysis, Dewey’s postulation of “culture” as coextensive with human “life-functions” provides a way around “Mind/Body” dualism without reductionism. Remember—“philosophy” represents the genetic-functional activity in which the “connection-and-distinction” between humans and nature comes up for discussion *at all*. There *is* no ontological distinction between the two—they are *continuous* (*yi* 一). Culture *is* nature. Every time “Culture/Nature” distinctions are made they are functional, not ontological. Thus, Dewey is not in any “blank slate” or “postmodern” camp. For positing sets of “connections-and-distinctions” within the human-nature continuum does not involve the denial of our common “human nature”—in fact, *it affirms it*. After all, as Donald E. Brown points out, the act of making “Culture/Nature” distinctions is itself a human universal.³⁵

Humanism and Intra-cultural Philosophy

Retaining as it does a realist component, Dewey’s cultural naturalism is consistent with what William James labels “humanism.” For James, reality is “what truths have to take account of.” James never doubts that “reality ‘independent’ of human thinking” plays a role in our experience—he only maintains that it is a “thing very hard to find” because “what we say about reality . . . depends on the perspective into which we throw it. The *that* of it is its own; but the *what* depends on the *which*; and the *which* depends on *us*.” Reality is what is given, but it is also what is *taken up* into language and thought. As James explains: “We humanly make an *addition* to some sensible reality, and that reality tolerates the addition.” Once these additions are made, it is difficult to “weed out the human contribution.”³⁶

Again, for Dewey, physiological processes such as fear have genuine standing in reality; but once they are taken up in sociocultural activity, it is hard to know where “nature” ends and where the “human” begins. Physiological responses associated with “anger,” for instance, serve an attack and defense function in nonhuman animals, but in the human world such a function is “as meaningless as a gust of wind on a mud puddle apart from [the] direction given it by the presence of other persons.” Within different sociocultural contexts, such raw physiological responses become “a smolder-

ing sullenness, an annoying interruption, a peevish irritation, a murderous revenge, a blazing indignation.”³⁷ In the case of human anger, where is the “Human/Nature” line drawn? Or, as James frames the question, does the river make its banks or do the banks make the river? “Just as impossible may it be to separate the real from the human factors in the growth of our cognitive experience,” James submits.³⁸

As we saw in chapter 6 of volume one, the *Zhuangzi* suggests that “knowing what Nature (*tian* 天) does and what the Human (*ren* 人) does is the optimal standpoint” for human beings.³⁹ Dewey would agree. He understands that the animal body performs myriad operations, and that “we are not aware of the qualities of many or most of these acts.” Meanwhile, “meanings acquired in connection with the use of tools and of language exercise a profound influence upon organic feelings.”⁴⁰ As James says, it may be impossible to clearly parse the human and natural in cognitive experience, primarily because the former element is so predominate in cognition. In his lost manuscript, Dewey recognizes “the decisive effect of *social* environment” upon human sensory experience, and acknowledges “how completely what are regarded as merely physical stimuli are transformed by the social setting in which they arise and operate.” He also recognizes the “extreme difference” between an actual experience with direct sensual character and “a quality that is called *sensory* because of analysis undertaken for a purpose.”⁴¹

Dewey just leaves this difference standing. *We have* the first sensation, and we can *discuss* the second. This is not the “postmodern relativist” position, because discussion does not go “all the way down,” as Edward Slingerland says. Remember—Dewey appeals to his own body-practice, the Alexander technique, in discussing some of the purely *physical* aspects of his own experience, and he describes the physiological aspects of things like anger and fear in his own realist terms: “They denote *ways of behavior*.”⁴² While it is difficult to capture such realities “raw” in language, nothing *but* such realities ever manage to get captured. There is no dualism here, and no reductionism—Dewey positively affirms the continuity between minds-and-bodies and humans-and-nature.

Dewey’s cultural naturalism thus opens broad avenues for intra-cultural philosophy, enabling substantive “Sameness/Difference” distinctions to be made for a variety of purposes in specific inquiries. While cultures might determine and value the “connection-and-distinction” between humans-and-nature, minds-and-bodies, etc. differently, cultural experience proceeds within a shared reality characterized by the principle of continuity (*yi* —). Hence, there is nothing preventing the philosopher from one culture from moving across situations in a genetic-functional mode, reflecting on her own connections-and-distinctions, until she arrives at the standpoint of another culture. This is not like trying to understand what it’s like to be a bat. One will

encounter conceptual obstacles and uncommon assumptions along the way, but there are no insurmountable chasms—no radical incommensurabilities.

In many ways, the process of cross-cultural understanding is like that of cross-personal understanding. The big difference, however, is that there will always be *one* insurmountable gap in cross-personal understanding. As James puts it, “Each of us dichotomizes the Kosmos in a different place.”⁴³ One can never fully experience what it is like to *be* another person. Radical pluralism here is the rule. There is nothing, however, that it is like to *be* a culture. To the reflective understanding, culture is known as an object and this does not violate its essence. Through patient and persistent inquiry, one can and does come to know other cultures better as matrices of “connections-and-distinctions” between humans-and-nature, minds-and-bodies, etc., with all their varied expressions and valuations.

The human commonalities (*xing* 性) that become expressed in diverse cultural practices (*xi* 習) might be thought of in terms of the “vague field” that David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames discuss in their methodological writings. Recall that Hall and Ames suggest that cultural systems are related to one another against an indeterminate background. Such a background, as they see it, is not a standing ground of perennial human meanings, but rather a “vague field of significances open to articulation for this or that purpose, but existing primarily *in potentia*.” Such a “productively vague” theory of culture understands cultural differences as “local distortions of a general field which is itself without specifiable boundary conditions,” but allows for “a vague complex of significances [to be] focused in accordance with a variety of interests.”⁴⁴

Hall and Ames’ position is sometimes misunderstood. Certain critiques of it are plainly mistaken.⁴⁵ Still, given that Hall and Ames chart their course through the straits of sameness and difference, the ideal of *not* lapsing into cultural essentialism is not perfectly realized—but such is the nature of making comparisons. As Dewey reminds us in his inaugural essay in *Philosophy East and West*, cultural terms are not “block-like” objects but rather “interwoven in a vast variety of ways” within a matrix of “complexities, differences, and ramifying inter-relationships.”⁴⁶ Again, Dewey was prepared to inaugurate a new term to describe this emerging vision—*Togetherness*—but he lost the manuscript in which he would have made the suggestion.⁴⁷ Intra-cultural philosophy picks up where Dewey left off, providing a basis for cross-cultural philosophy that is sensitive both to the vague background furnished by cross-cultural universals (i.e., human nature) and to the culturally situated nature of philosophy as a genetic-functional activity. Once recast in the broader framework of intra-cultural philosophy, the paradoxes and transgressions of comparative philosophy are mitigated, and its outcomes, while enabled by real

similarities and differences, are understood primarily in terms of the contexts in which they are situated.

Such contexts are cultural and thus “human.” Unlike William James, however, Dewey resists describing his position as “humanism.” One problem, Dewey explains, is that “humanism is a portmanteau word. A great many incongruous meanings have been packed into it.”⁴⁸ The word is typically contrasted with “naturalism” or with the natural sciences, thus making “humanism” into the “conviction that spiritual and ideal values are of supreme rank in the makeup of reality, and that these values are most adequately expressed in the great or classic achievements of humanity in literature and art—especially literature.”⁴⁹

As such, “humanism” adopts various guises on both the cultural left and the cultural right. On the one hand, it is the conceptual precursor to what Edward Slingerland and Steven Pinker call “postmodernism”—the seeming disregard for biological “nature” in favor of the products of human language (or “texts”) that go “all the way down.” On the other hand, “humanism” becomes the framework for cultural conservatives to fortify the “canon” against the encroachment of an increasingly secular “naturalism.” Irving Babbitt and Paul Elmer More, two conservative Harvard philologists, formulate what they call “New Humanism” accordingly. In their 1929 work, *Humanism and America*, they erect a sharp “Human/Nature” dualism and place the entirety of human value and meaning on the former side.⁵⁰

Dewey responds to Babbitt and More in his 1930 article, “What Humanism Means to Me.” Rejecting their “New Humanism” as “negative” and “anti-naturalistic,” Dewey explains that “in an age like our own, any philosophy which sets off [humans] from nature, and which condemns science as a foe to higher interests cannot, it is safe to predict, become productive.” Dewey’s positive conclusion is that “what Humanism means to me is *an expansion, not a contraction, of human life, an expansion of which nature and the science of nature are made the willing servants of human good.*”⁵¹ Dewey regards the “Spiritual/Material” dualism to be “the greatest dualism which now weighs humanity down,” and he looks forward to a time when the “vexatious and wasteful conflict between naturalism and humanism is terminated.”⁵² Dewey long hoped to discover a “common background or matrix” in which humanistic and naturalistic interests were unified—one in which “the tracing of their respective differentiations from this community of origin [would] not become a separation” but would secure “the possibility of fruitful interaction between them whenever desired.”⁵³ While turning to “life-functions” and the “connection-and-distinction” between humans-and-nature in the 1940s, Dewey realized that “culture” was precisely that common background or matrix.

So, Dewey had good reason to avoid the term “humanism.” Were he to label his standpoint “humanism” he would risk evoking the dualism that he was trying to overcome. He did sign the “Humanist Manifesto” in 1933 out of sympathy for its rejection of supernatural religion, but he did not thereby mean to identify his own position with its definition of “humanism.”⁵⁴ Corliss Lamont pressed Dewey to openly describe his philosophy as “humanism,” but Dewey demurred, concerned that the term suggested the “virtual isolation of [the human] from the rest of nature.” As Dewey explained to Lamont, “I have come to think of my own position as cultural or humanistic naturalism—Naturalism, properly interpreted seems to me a more adequate term than humanism.”⁵⁵ Lamont pressed on. “I still think [humanism] is a better word . . . [naturalism] is certainly confusing to the average person, who considers a Naturalist one who, like John Burroughs, makes a specialty of birds and flowers.”⁵⁶ Dewey stood firm. “I don’t see that I have anything to add to what I wrote you the other day. I note that you prefer the word Humanism as a name for my philosophy . . . I suppose I must be the judge in the case of my own philosophy.”⁵⁷

Dewey saw the specter of Slingerland’s “postmodern relativist” already on the horizon, and he anticipated by decades the crisis that C. P. Snow would describe in his 1959 work, *The Two Cultures*. As Dewey writes: “The philosophic dualism between [the human] and nature is reflected in the division of studies between the naturalistic and the humanistic, with a tendency to reduce the latter to the literary records of the past.”⁵⁸ The severance of humanistic studies from the natural sciences, as Dewey saw it, only furthers the “tragic split” that prevents culture from reaching its fullest potential.⁵⁹ Dewey resists trends in the Humanities that would deepen the rift—whether these came from the cultural left or the cultural right. He also steers clear of such trends in Cultural Anthropology. He maintains, for instance, that Ruth Benedict’s brand of “cultural-solipsism” only exacerbates “*the* problem in philosophical communication,” and he had no inclination to follow its lead.⁶⁰

Continuity and Common Sense

Dewey’s “cultural naturalism” now comes into view. Human culture, as well as cultural difference, is continuous with nonhuman nature—it *is* nature in one of its manifold expressions. Just as diverse forms of organic life are localized descendants from a common ancestor, diverse cultural practices (*xi* 習) are localized developments from a common source: a largely shared set of psycho-physiological dispositions (*xing* 性) that come from Nature (*tian* 天). Early Confucianism, broadly speaking, assumes the same.

With respect to the cultural diversity that it generates, human nature is an exceedingly *vague* background. Its content includes *ways of behaving* that trace back hundreds of millions of years and can only be observed “raw” through specific technological operations. “Anger,” for instance, stems from precortical activity centered in the amygdala that triggers the release of neurotransmitters increasing blood pressure, heart rate, and muscular tension. Structurally, this is a universal human trait. Thus, when St. Paul says, “Be angry but do not sin, do not let the sun go down on your anger,” everyone can relate. Such vague universal traits provide underground bridges that preclude cultural incommensurability while allowing for broad cultural differences. Human nature, thus understood, does not need to descend from any supernatural “God” or “Heaven.” Instead, the human mind-and-body is an adaptive mechanism coextensive with Nature (*tian* 天), one that is ideally suited to cope with a statistical composite of selection pressures that *Homo sapiens* faced during its evolutionary history.

How old, or how new, are different aspects of human nature? This is an empirical question and difficult to answer with precision. Leda Cosmides and John Tooby maintain that the human mind is largely a “Stone-Age” product, formed during the 99%+ of our history living in hunter-gathering societies.⁶¹ Others, like Stephen M. Downes, argue that not all human cognitive habits were secured during the Pleistocene epoch—some are older, some are newer, and such adaptations vary in flexibility.⁶² What evolutionary psychologists tend to agree on, however, is that “William James was right” about the genesis of common sense. As Cosmides and Tooby observe, “James’ view of the mind, which was ignored for much of the 20th century, is being vindicated today by evolutionary psychologists.”⁶³

The next step is to understand what this means for intra-cultural philosophy. Dewey follows James in foregrounding how “common sense” serves as the baseline against which “connections-and-distinctions” within culture are made. In order to see how progress in intra-cultural philosophy is possible, it needs to be understood how “common sense” is both the subject matter of intra-cultural philosophical inquiry and its prerequisite. This complex function needs to be better understood.

“Common sense” has a long and complicated history. Here, we focus on its development within classical American philosophy. In his lecture, “Pragmatism and Common Sense,” James argues that there are three sources of human understanding: common sense, science, and philosophy. Among these, common sense is the most primitive. It consists of evolutionary inheritances, or “indelible tokens of events in our race-history.” As James writes, “Our ancestors may at certain moments have struck into ways of thinking which they might conceivably not have found. But once they did so, and after

the fact, the inheritance continues.” This is the feature that aligns James with modern evolutionary psychology. For as he states: “My thesis now is this, that *our fundamental ways of thinking about things are discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors, which have been able to preserve themselves throughout the experience of all subsequent time.* They form one great stage of equilibrium in the human mind’s development, the stage of *common sense.*” The commonsense notions that James has in mind are core intuitions such as “things,” “kinds,” “minds,” “bodies,” and “causal influences.”⁶⁴

As products of evolution, there are two things that can be said about such notions. First, they are contingent. Commonsense categories might have been different had they not worked so well in coordinating transactions between the human species and its environment. “Were we lobsters, or bees,” James explains, “it might be that our organization would have led to our using quite different modes [of thinking].”⁶⁵ Second, our core intuitions are now virtually inescapable as native instincts, for having “first fitted; and then from fact to fact [having] *spread*, until all language rested on them . . . we are now incapable of thinking naturally in any other terms.” James actually underestimates the depth to which some commonsense notions have their “innings” in the brain, guessing that “young children and the inferior animals” have no general tendency to apprehend “things.” As he explains: “A baby’s rattle drops out of his hand, but the baby does not look for it . . . same with dogs. Out of sight, out of mind, with them.”⁶⁶ It is now understood, however, that object permanence is apprehended very early in human development and that it crosses species boundaries.⁶⁷

Common sense, according to James, becomes consolidated in pre-reflective experience long before it emerges into reflection. As it emerges, it comes under the scrutiny of philosophical and scientific understandings that “burst the bounds of common sense.” Here, cultural variation is the rule. Zhuangzi, Descartes, Einstein, the Buddha, Democritus, Darwin, Advaita Vedānta, the *Book of Changes*—these represent just some of the ways in which “things,” “kinds,” “minds,” “bodies,” and “causes” are reconstructed through human inquiry. Just as the Buddha knew that his approach to things “went against the stream” (*paṭisotagāmi*), science and philosophy tend to be critical with respect to established habits of thought. With the arrival of science and philosophy, says James, “havoc is made of everything” for common sense.⁶⁸ Dewey thought this dynamic was so important that his lost 1947 manuscript was initially intended to be a popular text on the relationship between common sense, science, and philosophy.⁶⁹ Accordingly, when he undertook the 1949 “Re-Introduction” to *Experience and Nature*, the relationship between these terms became its centerpiece.

Dewey's thoughts on this topic trace back to 1938's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. It is in this work that he explains that the phrase "common sense" has two meanings. The first is "sagacity": the power to "discriminate the factors that are relevant and important in significance in given situations." In this context, we speak of "sound practical sense" within a given cultural group.⁷⁰ The second meaning is that which James discusses, i.e., the common sense of "instinctive beliefs": intuitions that are "*common* in the sense of being widely, if not universally, accepted." In this context, "we speak of the *deliverances* of common sense as if they were a body of settled truths."⁷¹

Dewey understands common sense in the first respect to be *culturally specific*, and in the second respect to be *culturally universal*. As he suggests: "It is possible today, along with our knowledge of the enormous difference that characterize various cultures, to find some unified deposit of activities and of meanings in the 'common sense and feeling of [*humankind*].'" Dewey's list of universal notions that "dominate common sense in every period" is similar to James' own. Dewey's list goes as follows:

- 1) "Things" in a stable world, "designated by common nouns in general use."
- 2) "Natural Kinds," which are "overwhelming from the standpoint of common sense."
- 3) "Teleological Ends," which control ideas, beliefs, and judgments "in every culture."
- 4) "Ranks and Hierarchies," that grade things "low and high," "base and noble," etc.⁷²

Dewey also mentions "color and light" as deliverances of common sense, variously taken up into cultural experience, and he identifies the distinction between the "ordinary and extraordinary" to be a human universal. His concern in all such instances is with identifying "certain traits of all pre-philosophic beliefs, traits which form the common matrix out of which emerged all the world's philosophies, Asiatic as well as European."⁷³

Like James, Dewey maintains that science and philosophy challenge the standing of common sense. The degree to which such reflection is *critical* results in cultural differences with respect to the status of commonsense intuitions. For instance, by refining and securing certain articles of common sense in its logic and metaphysics (e.g., teleological ends, essential natures, etc.) Greek-medieval philosophy "precluded the possibility of the reaction of

science back into common sense.⁷⁴ As long as science was largely directed by common sense, it met with little resistance and returned only modest results. Thus, as Dewey reminds us, “[The] conclusions of Greek science . . . were much closer to the objects of everyday experience than are the objects of present scientific thought.”⁷⁵ From the standpoint of modern science, it was clear that the modest progress of Greek-medieval science was precisely a result of its *too*-close relationship to common sense. Thus, articles of common sense such as the “final cause” were eradicated from the natural sciences in the modern period. As a result, new instrumentalities were opened and new forms of inquiry enabled.

What thus became required, however, was a new logic based not on Greek-medieval common sense but on ideas that can better accommodate the “two-way movement between common sense and science.” This new logic never materialized, so Dewey undertook its development in his 1938 *Logic*. The work was premised on the fact that “common sense” can and does change in response to scientific, technological, and other cultural advancements. As Dewey thus observes: “Common sense in respect to both its content of ideas and beliefs, and its methods of procedure, is anything but a constant.” As he writes: “One has only to note the enormous differences in the contents and methods of common sense in modes of life that are respectively dominantly nomadic, agricultural, and industrial.”⁷⁶

Had Dewey not forwarded *two* working definitions of “common sense”—one *universal* and one *culturally specific*—this statement would be difficult to square with the idea that there is a “unified deposit” of activities and meanings that characterize the “common sense and feeling” of human beings tracing back to Paleolithic times. Remember, this is the common sense that for William James has its “innings” in the brain already. The question now becomes: *What is the relationship between the “common sense” that is universal to the species and the “common sense” that is culturally specific, i.e. “anything but a constant”?* In *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*, Dewey leaves the answer ambiguous (in fact, he doesn’t even ask the question), likely because he knew that a dualism lurked in its formulation. As his thinking evolves throughout the 1940s, a nondualistic answer gradually emerges. It is one that goes hand-in-hand with his “cultural turn,” and thus helps to set the agenda for what is here called intra-cultural philosophy.

Presenting this answer, however, is not as simple as pointing to select passages in Dewey’s published works. His unpublished (and belabored) attempts to compose the “Re-Introduction” to *Experience and Nature* suggest that Dewey *had* the answer but he didn’t know how to present it. Analysis got the better of him. In helping Dewey along, I propose revisiting a neglected corner of the Greek-medieval tradition. John Scotus Eriugena (c. 810–c. 880)

understands “analysis” in a unique and subtle way. “*Analytike* comes from the verb ‘*analuō*’ which means ‘I resolve’ or ‘I return,’” writes John. Accordingly, “*Analytike* is used in connection with the return of the division of the forms to the origin of that division.”⁷⁷ In this spirit, let us generate an analytic distinction to assist Dewey in getting his late-period insight across; and then, let us “return” through such analysis to what is continuous in Nature (or *tian* 天). Let us here posit a sharp “Universal/Culture-Specific” distinction.

Note that, with this distinction, “comparative philosophy” is instantly enabled. The “Universal/Culture-Specific” distinction tracks onto the “Sameness/Difference” distinction observed in chapter 1 of volume one. What is *universal* is the “Same,” and what is *culturally specific* is the “Different.” The uneasy co-presence of these features is what gives rise to what Zhang Xianglong calls the “comparison paradox.”⁷⁸ But no matter—as Zhang says, we make comparisons despite this paradox. So let us erect a framework in which to make our comparisons. The “common sense” that is common to humankind is the “Same,” so let us call it “*universal* common sense.” Meanwhile, the “common sense” that is peculiar to specific cultures is the “Different.” So let us call it “*culture-specific* common sense.”

This distinction enables us to establish the *tertium* necessary to make various observations. For instance, the manner in which any reflective thinker takes up *universal* common sense invariably modifies its form. The *universal* common sense intuition of “thing,” for example, is more primitive than Aristotle’s refined category of substance (*ousia*), which qualifies as *culture-specific* common sense for the Greek-medieval thinker. “Things,” as Dewey says, are “far from being the metaphysical substance or logical entity of philosophy” as distilled in the writings of Aristotle and his followers. First and foremost, “things,” suggests Dewey, are for *universal* common sense always located within doing-and-undergoing as “parties in life-transactions.” The clearest expression of the *universal* common sense notion of “things,” he submits, is when children take things up as, “what you do so-and-so with,” thereby uniting “things” with the *events* in which they are implicated.⁷⁹ As Dewey argues in *Experience and Nature*, “[*universal*] common sense has no great occasion to distinguish between bare events and objects; objects being events-with-meanings.”⁸⁰ In this respect, the Chinese notion of *shi* 事 (thing/event) might be somewhat closer than substance (*ousia*) to what Dewey regards as the *universal* common sense notion of “thing.” Such relative proximity, however, does not mean that *shi* is not also an article of *culture-specific* common sense, one with its own history of reflective use and development in Chinese culture.

In making this suggestion, the point to recognize is that Greek substance (*ousia*) and Chinese *shi* 事 are each *culture-specific* common sense variations of a more primitive, prelinguistic article of *universal* common sense, one that

has its “innings” in the brain already. Accordingly, every human language has a term for “thing,” and the meaning of such terms retains continuity with the “thing” of our prereflective *universal* common sense. Each term, however, also acquires distinct cultural associations in becoming *culture-specific* common sense. The same can be said for other items on Dewey’s list. Belief in “natural kinds,” for instance, “is overwhelming from the standpoint of [*universal*] common sense.”⁸¹ From an evolutionary perspective, identifying plants and animals according to their “kind” has given the human species a survival advantage, and all humans inherit such a *universal* common sense. Susan Gelman’s work on “essentialism” in early childhood supports this hypothesis.⁸²

Different cultural groups, however, come to explain the origin and criteria for “kinds” differently and organize things into non-identical categories in keeping with localized *culture-specific* common sense. As we saw in chapter 2 of volume one, Chinese thinkers tend to classify plants and animals into types (*lei* 類) according to where they live and how they transact with other things through resonant influences (*ganying* 感應). Such thinking in adult populations diminishes the influence of our universal essentialist intuitions. Chinese common sense, in this particular case, appears to be more “evolved” than Aristotelian common sense, which remains more closely aligned to the untutored intuitions of children. Chinese and Aristotelian commonsense notions, however, each retain some degree of continuity with the *universal* common sense about “kinds” while also evolving somewhere beyond it. As long as science and philosophy continue to operate within culture, such evolution will continue.

Methodologically speaking, this means that articles of *culture-specific* common sense, e.g., the Greek-medieval ideas of species (*eidōs*) and the Chinese ideas of *lei* 類, are comparable but highly unlikely to be identical. Like any two descendants from a common ancestor, they tend naturally to diverge within their respective habitats. However, “as is the way with evolutions generally,” as Dewey suggests, “[something] of the old, and often much of it, survives within or alongside the new.”⁸³ Ultimately, such continuity (*yi* 一) enables the comparative philosopher to detect points of “Sameness/Difference” within their continua. To such continua, John Scotus Eriugena’s “*Analytike*” beckons us to return.

The comparative philosopher, however, is slow to return—she cannot get free from the “Sameness/Difference” distinction and thus overlooks the basis upon which her comparisons are being made. She fails to see that it is the genetic-functional continuities *within* “common sense” trajectories that are operational, not the “Continuity/Discontinuity” *between* them. The comparative philosopher is *already* culturally located in one or another “stream” of common sense. Everyone is. The *tertium quids* of our comparative judg-