

## Chapter 1

# THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY OF COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY



... the lack of conversation between India and the West is most glaring among philosophers.  
—Anindita N. Balslev, ed., *Cultural Otherness*, p. 10

... comparative philosophy is more than an empty gesture, a skilled complement that creates more awkwardness than collegiality.  
—Richard Rorty, in Anindita N. Balslev, ed.,  
*Cultural Otherness*, p. 9

In spite of his strong conviction that what we call philosophy today is a Greek concept and hence an exclusively European practice, Richard Rorty oftentimes surprises his audiences with his presence at the East-West philosophy conferences, engaging in the dialogues or argument with comparative philosophers whose work reaches beyond the textual boundary of the West. Most recently, Rorty attended an international symposium on “Rorty Pragmatism and Chinese Philosophy,” held in East China Normal University in Shanghai, China in July 2004, committing himself to the discussion about American-Chinese pragmatist connections.<sup>1</sup> Traveling from conference to conference, Rorty delivered papers and made comments about non-Western intellectual traditions, raising issues about the practice of comparative philosophy. Not only did Rorty engage in face-to-face dialogues, he also had correspondence with non-Western thinkers, writing book reviews for the publications in East-West comparative philosophy. Rorty’s correspondence with Anindita N. Balslev, who, unlike Rorty, chose to work with the

Western and Indian texts simultaneously, will be the focus of the discussion of the present chapter.

The correspondence was initiated by Balslev, who responded to a conference paper that Rorty delivered at the Sixth East-West Comparative Philosophy Conference held at the University of Hawaii in 1989. In the paper, Rorty challenged the legitimacy of the discipline of comparative philosophy and the perceived relevance of Martin Heidegger to the East-West “intercultural comparison.” The main thrust of Rorty’s argument was that since philosophy is a uniquely Greek concept and a specialized form of intellectual inquiry instituted in the Western academy, any comparison of philosophy can create more awkwardness than collegiality among fellow philosophers.<sup>2</sup> Balslev disagreed with Rorty by suggesting that every historical culture has an intellectual tradition or traditions dedicated to the search for the “ultimate” questions of human existence and knowledge—either in India or Greece, thus the study of philosophy as an academic subject can certainly be comparative. Politely protesting Rorty’s attempt to undermine the role not only of comparative philosophy as an academic discipline, but indeed, that of philosophy itself, Balslev appealed to the contemporary urgency to implement a “theory” and “program” to back up the increasing interest in cross-cultural studies of the subject of philosophy. The subsequent exchange of letters was edited by Balslev and published under the title *Cultural Otherness: Correspondence with Richard Rorty*, first by the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies in 1989 and later by the American Academy of Religion, Scholars Press in 1991.

Balslev detected an ethnocentrism in Rorty’s definition of philosophy and suspected that it is the “theme of cultural otherness” and the category of the Other in general that had prevented academic philosopher’s such as Rorty, from participating in the cross-cultural conversation that continued to perpetuate “the East-West asymmetries in academic exchange.”<sup>3</sup> Rorty rejected Balslev’s accusation on pragmatic grounds. He pointed out that the only practical way to balance the asymmetry is to create a new social ‘economic order’ that reverses the “flow of money and power.” Only then could one solve the problem of convincing Western youths to take an interest in the subject matter of the East.

Toward the end of the correspondence, there emerged an impasse that seems to have frustrated both Rorty and Balslev. Rorty remarked that he was not even sure how to go around it. He also made a similar comment after he attended the Hawaii conference, that he felt

strongly that “the East and West did not meet,” and there was an absence of “common options to discuss, options...which William James called ‘live, immediate and forced.’”<sup>4</sup> Balslev almost agreed with Rorty there. She stated that it never seems to be so difficult for her to cross over a “boundary.”<sup>5</sup> Her questions to Rorty were thus: Was the *cultural* boundary between the “insider” and “outsider” of a given intellectual tradition so *conceptually* conditioned that it automatically transcribed itself into a *disciplinary* boundary? Was it always necessary to impose a priori judgments for the comparative studies of different intellectual traditions?<sup>6</sup>

Needless to say, those unresolved questions further perpetuated the riddlelike East-West relation that we had discussed in the introduction. It seems that, one way to make some sense out of this seemingly unfruitful exchange between Rorty and Balslev is to take a close look at the ways in which some of the arguments were laid out and developed and how their respective positions were informed by a specific body of knowledge and a personal interest and background. And yet, the lack of discussion and an understanding of each other’s knowledge formation and personal background anticipated the failure of the cross-cultural communication. To bring out the overlooked issues and illuminate the missing background that informs the respective positions that they tried to defend may shed some light to a number of issues that are of immediate importance to philosophy’s self-understanding; the future development of its curriculum, and a general understanding of the cultural and intellectual topics of one’s Other. For instance, we will try to demonstrate how a philosophical attitude that was developed in Western academies over the centuries had informed Rorty’s discomfort to engage in what he termed the “intercultural comparison.” Conversely, we will try to trace the development of a more recent comparative scholarship that challenged the self-understanding of philosophy sanctified by the canonical thinkers of the West, which seems to deeply implicate Balslev’s position and argument.

*Philosophy, Essentialism, and the “Intercultural Comparison” – Rorty’s argument*

Rorty’s aversion to comparative philosophy as a disciplinary practice in the academy of the West was first expressed as an aversion to philosophy itself. In his conference paper, “Philosophy, Novelists, and Intercultural Comparison: Heidegger, Kundera, and Dickens,” Rorty

challenged the perceived relevance of Western philosophy and Heidegger to East-West comparison, which seemed to be prevalent among the conference participants at the Hawaii meeting. The main thrust of Rorty's criticism of philosophy as a Western intellectual tradition and disciplinary study is that it is inherently "essentialist." Philosophical essentialism, among other things, has reduced the complexity, diversity, and intricate details of the lifeworld into abstract concepts. This kind of reductive essentialism may be useful in the development of a mathematical language to describe the "microstructures behind confusing macro-structures," but proves to be useless in searching for a law or universal pattern underlining social histories and world cultures, according to Rorty.<sup>7</sup> In an echo to a postmodern call for a deconstruction of the Western metaphysical tradition, Rorty proceeded to undermine the tendency to "theorize about human affairs,"<sup>8</sup> and abstract from human life affairs "the essence, form, underlining structure," and , the ineffable Other.<sup>9</sup>

In Rorty's view, Heidegger's work typified such a philosophical essentialism. Whereas Plato looked down, Heidegger gazed back; both men attempted to search for something that is wholly Other than the West itself in order to overcome its tradition. Instead of looking at the world as it is lived or as it is unfolding, Heidegger directed his gaze back to remote Greek antiquity, based upon which, as Heidegger hoped, a social Utopia of a fourfold world of heaven, earth, gods, and mortals may be recaptured and projected onto the present and future. Under an equalizing philosophical gaze, Heidegger sees, as Rorty described, no distinction between "Stalin's Russia and Roosevelt's America," since they only represent "surface perturbation, distraction from essence by accidents," and "metaphysically speaking," they are the same.<sup>10</sup> Hence, in Rorty's assessment, Heidegger's ambition to overcome the tradition—metaphysics and technology—of the West had actually failed to accomplish its objective. Not only did it blur the distinction of fundamentally different sociopolitical realities, it also created a new type of metaphysical thinking, a thinking of an ancient antiquity as a primordial reality standing beyond and above everyday life. The return to a primordial reality, among other things, sustained an existence of a social class of ascetic priests, including Heidegger himself, whose obsession with purity and cleanliness and refusal to muddle with everyday human affairs in turn facilitated a sense of self-hatred among Western intellectuals and a pervasive "social pessimism" in Western societies. Thus to view Heidegger's words as "the last message of the West," and his work

as paradigmatic of Western philosophical reflection was counterproductive, if not entirely misleading.

Thus concluded, Rorty advised against using Heidegger's work with Eastern texts and with the practice of comparative philosophy in general. The latter, conducted within the framework of the essentialism, usually compares the entire intellectual traditions of the East and West, encouraging the "adaptations of a single transcultural character type to different environments."<sup>11</sup> Putting the West "as a whole," in contrast to "the rest of the world as a whole," comparative philosophy is hardly "a royal road to intercultural comparison," but rather, an easy way of out the difficulties facing the disciplinary practice.<sup>12</sup>

Rorty's critical attitude toward the discipline of comparative philosophy is persistent. A year prior to the East-West comparative philosophy in Hawaii, Rorty had explicitly expressed his skepticism about the possibility of comparing Eastern and Western philosophical texts in his book review on Larson and Deutsch's edited collection, *Interpreting across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy*. Rorty stated, "comparative philosophy," understood as "applying the term 'philosophy' to Asian books" is only "an empty gesture, a stilled complement that creates more awkwardness than collegiality."<sup>13</sup> The gesture signifies a false complement that assumes Asians have what the Europeans called philosophy and that there is a need in Asia for philosophy to be taught in the way that the Europeans did in the modern universities. Therefore, one should not be afraid to be accused of being "a cultural imperialist," but be courageous enough to reassert an old question in "honest bewilderment," is there philosophy in Asia? Although, the question may be taken to imply that Asians are not intellectually mature, yet, one may simply defend one's position by stating that such a question was posed only to find out if Asians need philosophy the way that the Europeans do.<sup>14</sup>

Rorty indeed threw the question back to Balslev when she invited Rorty, in one of her letters, to think along with her in terms of how to build some theoretical or philosophical programs in support of comparative study of the subject matter of philosophy. Rorty asked her to reflect first whether Asians have had a need to teach various Western philosophers in their departments of philosophy and whether the Western categories of philosophy were useful to organize the Indian texts. Specifically, Rorty asked, "Have Asians had any of the needs which have led Western universities to teach Seneca, Ockham, Hume, and Husserl in the same department?"<sup>15</sup> Could the Western categories of metaphysics,

epistemology, and logic be employed to classify the classical Indian texts? If so, Rorty frankly admitted, he would be disappointed.<sup>16</sup>

However, there is an alternative way to conduct East-West comparison, if Balslev were to insist on such a practice. For instance, Rorty recommended, comparative philosophers could supplement the intercultural dialogue on the theories with that of the “antitheory.”<sup>17</sup> That is, they could use the narrative traditions of the West, such as literature and journalism, to conduct East-West study. The nineteenth century realist novels were a much better genre of writing that the West could extend to the East. Unlike philosophers, novelists did a much better job of portraying modern Western societies; unlike Heidegger, Dickens gave a more reliable account of the realities of Western or European cultures. In vivid details and with a good sense of humor, Dickens provides a “diversity of points of view” and “a plurality of descriptions of the same events.”<sup>18</sup> Whereas philosophical essentialism attempted to retain the distinction between reality and appearance, essence and phenomenon, literary pluralism blurred the distinction between the seeming opposites. Whereas Heidegger projected a utopian “pastoral” world where “life is given shape by its relationship to the primordial fourfold,” Dickens presented a world filled with “a crowd of eccentrics rejoicing in each other’s idiosyncrasies, curious for novelty rather than nostalgic for primordiality.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, in Rorty’s view, one finds in Dickens’s literary world a “democratic utopia,” where “tolerance and curiosity replaced the quest for truth and the greatness...the admirable intellectual virtues” of the modern West.<sup>20</sup>

*Could Rorty Point a Way Out of the Difficulties  
of Intercultural Comparison?*

Anyone who has read Rorty’s philosophical papers produced over the last two decades may have an appreciation of his persistent effort to undermine the essentialist and metaphysical thesis that has dominated the thinking of generations of philosophers in the Western academy. Rorty’s critical assessment of philosophy—an insider’s view of the inherent problems of its tradition and discipline—could be a welcoming invitation for the outsiders to contribute to the philosophy’s self-reflection and self-criticism. For instance, one may expect that Rorty could perhaps shed some light on how the philosophical essentialism had negatively affected the study of Eastern ideas in the Western academy and why the attempt to apply Western categories to “name” non-

Western texts could be considered a form of “epistemological violence,” as deconstructionist thinker Jacques Derrida termed it. According to Derrida, such a naming practice may obscure and even distort the historical and cultural specificities of the non-Western texts and traditions. If Western philosophical categories such as logic, epistemology, and metaphysics are inappropriate for classifying Eastern texts and canons, could Rorty help identify a set of new conceptual categories that are mutually intelligible to both Indian and Western thinkers in terms of organizing and understanding the history of ideas, texts, and scriptures of one another? How else would philosophers in the West get to know the way that Indians go about pursuing the answers to the ultimate questions about life, human bondage, and liberation, discussed between fathers and sons, husbands and wives at home, and in the market? Balslev asked. Her ultimate question posed to Rorty is that, “Does “*darśana* or *ānvīksikī* in the Sanskritic tradition” correspond to “what is called *philosophia* in the west?”<sup>21</sup> It appears that Balslev had sincerely hoped that Rorty could join her in the self-reflection of the disciplinary position, exploring some methodological questions in the newly emerged critical juncture of comparative philosophy.

Rorty indeed responded to the invitation, as we mentioned earlier. He had initially suggested substituting theory with antitheories in doing East-West comparison in his conference paper. Rorty’s appeal to an “aestheticism,” echoing with the voices of other postmodern thinkers before him, seems to rest on the perceived power of the literary genre to free the modern Western mind from the domination of metaphysical thinking. For instance, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others once used either poetry or prose as a way to write out of the confinement of philosophical essentialism. However, neither in the conference paper nor his subsequent correspondence to Balslev, did Rorty explore any textual strategy to facilitate such an experiment. One expects if Rorty were truly interested in helping to develop the alternative textual strategies for intercultural comparison, he would be able to outline some possibility to endorse “a program for philosophy as narrative” that facilitates “such pragmatic virtues” as “tolerance and comfortable togetherness,” as Balslev quoted him.<sup>22</sup> Apparently, Rorty showed no interest in convincing the conference participants, and later, his correspondent, as to how a Victorian literary genre was more *accessible* for comparative philosophers with non-Western backgrounds and why Dickens’s writing of Victorian England in the nineteenth century was a more realistic representation of modern Western societies

than Heidegger's philosophical reflection produced between the two World Wars in the twentieth century. For one may well argue that philosophy or literature, written in abstract or concrete terms, are simply two different genres of writing describing various aspects of human life experiences. Balslev indeed challenged his emphasis on literary writing and pointed out that there are certain texts that could not easily be classified as either philosophy or literature, and that the overlapping of different genres of writing is actually a common practice in the postmodern writing world. Hence, Rorty's preference for literature over philosophy could merely be a matter of his personal taste for a certain genre of writing over others. Otherwise, Rorty would have to explain why did he personally choose to remain an academic philosopher and to continue to speak and write from this framework but encourage comparative philosophers to substitute philosophy with literature. Another seemingly confusing message that Rorty sent out concerns the status of Heidegger in the canon of philosophy. One cannot make any sense why did Rorty, while ranking Heidegger as one of the three most original thinkers in the twentieth century, decided to undermine his work in a cross-cultural setting, and in the company of comparative philosophers?<sup>23</sup>

*Comparative Philosophy as a Way Out of Philosophical  
Essentialism—Balslev's Solution*

Balslev certainly agreed with Rorty that in the West philosophical essentialism had managed to reduce the lifeworld and daily pursuits into abstract concepts and objects for theoretical reflection; and that the traditional metaphysical thinking and its modern epistemological assumptions need to be critically assessed and undermined. The practice of comparative philosophy, remaining in the grip of the essentialism, may have very well propagated a transcultural character, which certainly calls for a deconstruction. In her preface to the *Correspondence*, Balslev warned her colleagues in the comparative disciplines to resist the temptation of a priori judgments and "transcultural interpretive strategies"<sup>24</sup> in their interpretation of the "overlapping contents" and "incommensurable otherness of the other traditions."<sup>25</sup>

However, the disagreement of how philosophy could be rescued from the grip of metaphysics polarized their positions. In Rorty's opinion, philosophy as a discipline in the West is declining—it is losing its "efficacy and status." Perhaps, it is due to its inherent essentialist nature, or to the emergence of the new disciplinary studies and genres of writ-



ing. Rorty's remark resonates with the postmodern call to "end" philosophy. While Heidegger had claimed that only if we were to end metaphysics or ontology, the underlining structure of philosophy, could the thinking begin, Derrida asserted that only if we were to close the book, would we be able to open the text.

Unlike Rorty, Balslev still believed in the cardinal importance of philosophy. It is the repository from which the major torrent of the intellectual and cultural enquiries emerged and is still emerging.<sup>26</sup> As such, ending philosophy or doing away with philosophical essentialism would lead to a cultural and intellectual nihilism. A more constructive alternative to renew the rigor of the discipline, Balslev suggested, would be to enlarge its intellectual horizon and extend its monologue with the Self to a dialogue with the Other—the intellectual traditions of the East. Practicing philosophy comparatively and dialogically is both theoretically and practically plausible. Historically, there was no evidence suggesting that any intellectual traditions had closed up their conceptual horizons, even if they might have achieved a complete self-understanding. In the West, Balslev tells us, the comparison of Eastern and Western ideas can be traced back to the early "intellectual adventure in the Indian subcontinent," and to certain individuals' efforts to "search for philosophy" outside the boundaries of the Western canon.<sup>27</sup> Over time, comparative philosophy established itself as an academic discipline, gaining its methodological maturity and recognition by other disciplines through detailed historical scholarship and analyses, despite some skepticism of its legitimacy.<sup>28</sup> On the other side of the world, for instance, it is India's encounter with the modern West that had given rise to the practice of comparative philosophy in the Indian Continent. European ideas and philosophical systems not only provided analytical tools for reconstructing the classical texts, but awoke a sense of self-pride of India's intellectual and spiritual past. The methodological enrichment and self-affirmation of the value of its cultural heritage eventually yielded to the most productive period in Indian intellectual history—the Indian Renaissance. In her own experience, Balslev testified that the opportunities to be exposed to non-Indian traditions and to be able to work with Western and Indian texts simultaneously, were intellectual fruitful and personally rewarding.

The practice of comparative philosophy not only helps with overcoming the pitfall of philosophy's essentialism, hence revitalizing the tradition and discipline; it may serve as a forum for a broader academic understanding of each other's traditions and hence a way to balance the

East-West asymmetry in the academy. The attempt to correct unbalanced circulation of ideas and texts between the East and West is urgent. Balslev cited the influential Indian thinker, Mehta, to back up her claim. Mehta had pointed out that there was a long-standing, noreciprocal relation between Indian political theorists and their Western counterparts; and that it is Indian thinkers who took the concerns of their Western colleagues seriously by making efforts to master the languages necessary to understand the Western philosophical texts, but not the other way around. Echoing Mehta, Balslev suggested the situation in the department of political science actually mirrors the Western academy as a whole, and that the lack of interest and commitment to the understanding of one's Other have impoverished the individual capacity to "sustain its part in this dialogue" in the West.<sup>29</sup>

According to Balslev, the lack of exposure and knowledge of one's intellectual Other in the academy also impaired a social and public understanding of one another among the diverse groups of peoples and hence, contributed negatively to the ongoing cultural stereotyping and social segregation. For instance, it is generally regarded that the Eastern notion of time is cyclical, in contrast to that of the Judeo-Christian view of time as linear. The time metaphors of the circle and arrow have carried some negative social implications, among them, the perception of Eastern histories and societies as static or unchanging and hence, lacking in progress and even the possibility for salvation.

Thus, for Balslev, the practice of comparative philosophy not only carries an educational mission but a social responsibility. Appealing to the social and moral responsibility of professional philosophers, Balslev urged them to familiarize themselves with their non-native traditions, contributing their knowledge to the ongoing process of socialization and cross-cultural education of the general public. She claimed, "philosophers matter; their ideas are of consequences." The more daring they are to cross the boundaries of their native traditions, "the better for the intellectual life of the future generation."<sup>30</sup> Balslev's position in this regard does not differ from that of Rorty. One recalls that in his Hawaii conference paper, Rorty had spoken against the ascetic priests or Heideggerian type of philosophers who were socially disengaged and politically indifferent and strongly encouraged his philosophical colleagues to locate their intellectual exercises in a larger context of social concerns.

***Rorty and Balslev's Dispute over Philosophy Curriculum***

The similar understanding between Rorty and Balslev on the social role that a responsible philosopher should play did not lead to an agreement on what kind of change was needed in the academy to not only renew the discipline of philosophy, but also to help with the social and cultural integration of segregated societies at large. In Balslev's view, the first step is to reform the philosophy curriculum at institutions of higher learning. The need for curriculum reform is self-explanatory in Balslev's view. For Western educational institutions at large are preoccupied with "national narratives," which does not help facilitate the "global interdependent societies in any honest sense."<sup>31</sup> In her judgment, the core curriculum of philosophy typically reflects such a preoccupation. Compared to other disciplines, "the lack of conversation between India and the West is most glaring among philosophers."<sup>32</sup> Efforts to reach out for intellectual resources outside the Western canon are rare, and there is "a dearth"<sup>33</sup> of representations of Eastern texts in the department of philosophy. The inadequate representation of non-Western texts in the philosophy curriculum, in turn, perpetuates a "parochial" attitude that ignores "the discourses of other cultures" altogether.<sup>34</sup> The message that Balslev attempted to convey is clear. The new generation should be "socialized differently" and the capacity for thinking globally should not only be a catchword but an educational credit. Non-Western intellectual resources and traditions need to be added on and integrated into the curriculum. To pursue a curriculum reform, Balslev called for a "conscious planning and commitment," as well as the participation of academic philosophers who "customarily work within the bounded space of their own traditional disciplinary concerns."<sup>35</sup>

Theoretically, Rorty agreed with Balslev's assessment. He stated that "the West is a more compulsory subject for people in the East but not vice versa." It is correct to say that "we in the West have not exerted ourselves enough to get relevant information" about the East; and "it is we in the West who are impoverished by our failure to sustain our part in "the East-West dialogue."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, it is reasonable to require Western students to learn more of the non-Western curriculum and to become more involved in building of a "global community."<sup>37</sup>

Yet, Rorty quickly changed his mind *as* he paused to reflect some pedagogical problems. For instance, how do we implement a comparative curriculum in the department of philosophy? Quantitatively, unlike

the Western textual tradition that is relatively “homogenous and monolithic”—such as nineteenth-century curriculum composed of “the Christian-scientific-technological” traditions—Eastern texts contained in the multiple sources in the “Islamic tradition, two great Indian traditions, a Chinese and a Japanese tradition” are massive in numbers, Rorty argued in his letter to Balslev. Given such a large body of texts, how much territory does comparative philosophy curriculum need to accommodate Eastern texts? Moreover, there are significant thematic gaps to be reconciled if the Eastern texts are to be inserted into the Western canon. Rorty asked, how could Eastern texts be inserted into Western canon without creating “pointless hurdles to be leaped over” by Western students?<sup>38</sup> In other words, how could Eastern texts, the Upanishads and the Analects, for instance, be added to the philosophy curriculum without furnishing students with any social and historical background knowledge of ancient India and China, where those texts were composed and produced?

Rorty imagined that a solution to those perceived pedagogical problems perhaps lies with the possibility of importing some native intellectuals to the West, who may then supply some missing background knowledge of Eastern texts and thus bridge the thematic gaps. Yet such a solution does not seem plausible either. For to implement such a practice would cause a “brain drain” of the intellectual resources of non-Western societies, given the fact that in the East there may not yet be enough cultural resources to engage in “*mission civilizatrice*.”<sup>39</sup> Talking about the civilization mission, let us think about the situation in nineteenth-century colonial Africa and India, Rorty suggested. Those were the times when young people were forced to take courses in Plato and Shakespeare without having any sense of what to do with them except for passing civil exams to obtain better jobs in the colonial government. Today, how could we justify to Western youth that they need to take courses in the subjects of the East?

With Rorty, the pedagogical problems thus translated themselves into ideological ones. The term *mission civilizatrice* that he uses cannot help but communicate a negative meaning of imposition and indoctrination, given the context of modern colonialism. As Rorty himself realized that the nineteenth century was “the great period of imperialism and...indoctrination of non-Westerns with the Western ideas.”<sup>40</sup> Given the self-appointed mission to civilize other peoples went hand-in-hand with the aggressive political and economic domination that had become an out-of-date practice; it is perplexing for us to see why

Rorty chose to review Balslev's call for an East-West comparative philosophy program in the light of colonialism and *mission civilizatrice*. What did Rorty imply when he drew a parallel between a comparative philosophy program today and the colonial curriculum of the past centuries? For Balslev and other critics of Rorty, his blurring of the distinction between the two sets of historical contexts that informed the colonial educational agenda and that of the comparative curriculum today, respectively, is likely to invite serious criticism. He could be blamed for his oversight on the respective historical and political realities to say the least, and possibly a "mild ethnocentrism," or "secondary narcissism," or even "strong imperialism" at the worst.<sup>41</sup>

*Are Philosophical Questions Disguised Political Questions?*

So far as we can see, Rorty did not take on the question that Balslev invited him to address, nor did he attempt to elaborate on any textual strategies as alternatives to the essentialist approach to the East-West comparison. Instead, Rorty dismissed most of Balslev's questions based on a pragmatist stance.

Reasserting his pragmatic tradition, Rorty declared in his reply to Balslev that what Balslev had identified as philosophical questions are actually "disguised political questions." For instance, the discussions about the Other and that of identity and difference and so on frequently debated among philosophers in both the West and India, as Balslev would like him to believe, are not genuine philosophical questions but rather a function of "human interests."<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Rorty pointed out, the perceived East-West asymmetry in the academic exchange that Balslev would like him to address is not philosophical but a direct reflection of the unbalanced distribution of material wealth and power between the Eastern and Western worlds.

Assuming that all the philosophical problems could be settled in pragmatic terms, would it be more productive for comparative philosophers to talk politics instead of philosophy? Rorty suggested, indeed, that instead of talking about reforming the philosophy curriculum, perhaps it would be more constructive to discuss the plans for social and political reforms of Eastern societies. For instance, instead of attempting to create a new "cultural order," would it be more practical to discuss the ways of implementing an "economical order" with which the flow of money and power between the East and West can be reversed and with which members of the Eastern societies would be allowed to pursue

their individual potentials and eliminate “the struggles between the haves and have-nots”?<sup>43</sup>

To talk about politics, the new economic order, and the ways of redistributing money and power, one needs to consider how the Western model of modernization may be applied to the non-Western societies. In Rorty’s judgment, Europe or the West has developed the optimal model for modernization and social progresses. The liberal democracy and technology greatly reduced human suffering and maximized personal happiness. What Rorty told Balslev in his letter is that what had prepared the West for the social progress was secularization. Secularization allowed the Western man to shift his relation with the historical and atemporal being, that is, God, truth, to that of the temporal, that is, the one between “man and his descendants.” This shift enabled Western societies to pursue daily happiness and encourage the accumulation of material wealth. By implication, Rorty seemed to suggest that the societies that did not go through such a secularization process, its members are still relating themselves to gods, spirits, or heroes in order to bear what is unbearable in everyday conditions such as poverty and inequality. In the latter case, there will always be a need for and dependence on a superhuman being and the presence of ascetic priests. By comparison and contrast, Rorty explicitly stated that modern Western societies signify “a culture of hope,” whereas their Eastern counterparts signify a “culture of endurance.”<sup>44</sup>

Rorty’s proposal to resolve all the philosophical problems by pragmatic or political means did not persuade Balslev to change her orientation and conviction. She argued that it is very dubious to assume today that the Western model of modernization can be directly applied to the non-Western societies and that non-Western peoples may desire modernization but not necessarily Westernization. Looking retrospectively, since independence from the colonial yoke, Eastern societies face very different social historical circumstances in a postcolonial world than their Western counterparts found themselves in at the beginning stages of modernization. The political leaders of these non-Western societies, such as Gandhi and others, also perceived some inherent problems and pitfalls of the Western Empire, and hence were motivated to look for alternatives to modernize their young nations.

We can certainly tell that Rorty’s statement about the process of secularization and the reduction of religion to a mechanism for coping with poverty and inequality, or a means to sanctify the endurance for human suffering, would be challenged from both the Western and

Eastern fronts. For some social thinkers in the West may argue with him that, with the advent of secular humanism and, the successful accumulation of material wealth, and technological power, the Western part of the world has not been able to eliminate some serious social problems, such as urban poverty, human suffering, social injustice and inequality, racism, and other catastrophes witnessed by two World Wars. On the Eastern front, scholars of Eastern religions may point out that Rorty's assumption about the role religion plays in Eastern societies betrays a significant misunderstanding of a basic tenet of their religious traditions. They may want to inform Rorty that most Eastern religious traditions—Buddhism, Confucianism, and Daoism, to name a few—did not evolve around an ahistorical and atemporal being in the first place. From the time of the very conception of these traditions, there had been a strong humanistic tendency and approach to the so-called ultimate questions of the world and human conditions, and the religious practices have never exclusively been oriented toward a creator God, or supernatural being. For instance, Buddhism started out with a rejection of the pre-Buddhist notion of Brahman/Atman—a theo-metaphysical presence, and proposed to see the world as co-originated and mutually conditioned one made of physical, mental, and psychological events (*dharmas*). In fact, the seemingly overly humanistic orientation in Buddhist and Confucian traditions are sometimes perceived as religions without God or not religions at all by some Western scholars of religions!

### *The Impasse between Rorty and Balslev*

Toward the end of *Correspondence*, readers can clearly see an “impasse” being developed between the correspondents, despite great efforts on both sides to achieve a cross-cultural understanding. For Balslev, the lack of intellectual dialogue between Western and Eastern philosophers are most glaring; and the East-West asymmetry in the Western academy is “conspicuous.”<sup>45</sup> For Rorty, there is no “uncontroversial starting point to compare different intellectual systems,”<sup>46</sup> and what is regarded as philosophy is simply a Greek concept. Whereas Balslev argued about the importance of understanding the intellectual systems of the Other—what is beyond one's own native traditions, and the necessity of an East-West comparative curriculum as an integral part of a larger enterprise of global integration, Rorty perceived the advocacy of

comparative philosophy and the requirement of Western students to learn more about non-Western books virtually the same as perpetuating the colonial curriculum that indoctrinates one group of people with that of the other.

It seems the overemphasis on the political and social dimensions of the East-West encounter had created a hostile dialogue environment, in which, each sees the argument of the other as being implicated by a coercive power that intended to challenge the conviction of oneself. The hostility in turn gives rise to a self-defense mechanism that prevented both sides from seeing the position of the other and from joining efforts to explore the possibility of communicating of not only pedagogical and academic but social and cultural.

To get around this impasse so as to make some sense of this seemingly unfruitful exchange, we may suggest first to Rorty that not all pedagogical problems are necessarily ideological by nature, and that education about other cultures cannot always be reduced to the means to fulfill a practical vocational end. The interest of young people in learning about other cultures and texts—either Shakespeare for Asian students or Confucius for Western youths are not always motivated by practical concerns to pass exams, get good jobs, or to be credited as multicultural. The equation is not valid simply because the pursuit of intellectual interest is not always *proportionally* conditioned by political trends and the perceived practical utility, and therefore, the changing of the political and economical dynamic alone may not rectify the academic East-West asymmetry. Similarly, we may remind Balslev that a program does not always need to have an institutional endorsement to promote and justify its legitimacy of a curriculum committee to make the non-Western subjects a prerequisite for the students to take. For the comparative study of a variety of academic subjects, including philosophy, is already an existence in the academy in the West; and Western education today is not always preoccupied with only the national narrative as she has claimed. To draw a temporary closure of our discussion on the first part of the *Correspondence*, we may suggest that the interest in learning about one's intellectual Other and the academic curriculum cannot always be facilitated by either a political economy or an institution in the form of a Department, program, or curriculum committee. On the contrary, it is usually the latter that responds to the challenge and demand of the former. What then are the "real" issues that Rorty and Balslev are debating?