Preface

> The constant task of . . . thought is to establish working connections between old and new subject-matters. . . . [T]he greater the gap . . . the greater is the burden imposed upon reflection; the distance between old and new is the measure of the range and depth of the thought required.
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> —John Dewey, *Experience and Nature*

It is April 2001 as I write this preface and the words ricochet off the walls: "Apologize, regret, sorry, very sorry." China and the United States are literally in a war of words that threatens to become something else. Jets and spy planes and world peace hang on the nuance of a word. How did it come to this? This book suggests an answer.

The roots of this crisis are to be found in the cultural meanings by which these two global powers live. This is not the first time the threat of violence has emerged from misunderstanding nor will it be the last. What makes this situation important is that it so clearly marks out the cultural sources of this and future disputes. The dispute centers on the difference between "sorry" and "very sorry." For want of a "very," the world could be very different today.

It is meanings that are at the root of this and other problems of globalization. Is there a way to span this division and bring these two powerful cultures into fruitful contact? Philosophy can be understood as the critic of cultures. Culture rests on meanings. These meanings are embedded in a nest of cultural presuppositions. Getting at these cultural assumptions is the most difficult aspect of coaxing different cultures to some level of mutual understanding.

I was therefore completely surprised when my graduate seminar on the philosophy of John Dewey given at the University of Hawaii in the late 1990s was so enthusiastically received by students of Asian descent and by students studying Chinese philosophy and culture. In fact Roger Ames, director of the Institute for Chinese Studies, attended these sessions and noted the similarity between Dewey's thought and Confucian philosophy. He asked if he could use a transcript of the seminar in his own course on human rights in China and the West. That experience was also favorable. So this book is the result of many hands. What I have tried to do is point out as simply and clearly as possible what I take to be the parallel understandings of culture and the human person found in the works of John Dewey and Confucius.

Hawaii is the midpoint of the Pacific poised to be the fulcrum around which future dialogue with Asia will occur. I saw that future as caught up in yet another question: what did Dewey share with Asia?

The plot thickened when I recalled that Dewey had spent sixteen months lecturing in China. Now as the recent problems over language clearly demonstrate, the Chinese are a very serious people. Therefore when I learned that the National University of China granted Dewey an honorary degree with a citation calling him a "Second Confucius," my ears pricked up. The Chinese are not flatterers given to easy compliments and to yoke this twentieth century philosopher with the founder of their cultural outlook is a matter of immense importance.

In creating this work I have tried to write in a clear down-to-earth style. Also I have deliberately created a short book, one that can quickly steer the reader toward what is important. To present in a clear way the insights of a great thinker is no easy task. And the difficulty is doubled when two thinkers are involved. Still: the way toward an adequate understanding remains open if a simple commandment is obeyed. A comparative philosopher's golden rule ought always be: stick to what is central. Therefore: the themes presented in this volume have been narrowed down to a select few: experience, felt intelligence, and culture. These ideas are radically transformed in the hands of John Dewey and Confucius. By the time this study is completed, they will have taken on fresh meanings. Hopefully, this transformation will help create deeper cultural understanding in an increasingly interconnected world.

My method is straightforward. In discussing these themes, I will first let Dewey have his say and then reengage his notion through a discussion of similar ideas in Confucian philosophy.[1] The result should be a set of interlocking ideas that take on thicker and deeper significance as the study proceeds. My aim is to present these interwoven themes as a support system for a cross-cultural dialogue on global understanding. If they are to serve their primary purpose, these ideas should exhibit two characteristics. First, they should be coherent in the sense that each theme requires a necessary reference to the others. This is one of the hallmarks of systematic philosophy as practiced in the West. It finds its analog in the Chinese insistence on the radical importance of conceptual polarity as the ground of thinking. Thus the yin-yang quality of Chinese thinking is matched by the demand for coherence in systematic thinking. Another quality shared by Dewey and Confucius is the need for direct experiential contact between the ideas offered and the actual world of human beings. Thoughts should make a difference. If they do not, they are empty and vain. The difference made by good thinking is to be found in the depth provided by the mixing of ideas and experience. Real ideas provide new dimensions that illuminate the situations within which we exist. Thus philosophy is always a form of cultural criticism. It should, as Dewey insisted, be directed towards the real problems of human beings rather than the problems of other professional philosophers.

The goal of this study is to provide a set of ideas so braided together that they provide a powerful new sense of the possibilities of human life. Both Dewey and Confucius share a similar conviction: human beings must grow in order to become fully human. They are not naturally good or bad. In fact, before their entrance into the social order, little can be said about who or what they are. There is therefore a primary dimension always to be taken into account whenever we talk about human culture. The social aspect is front and center when we speak of the possibilities of genuine human growth and development. To pretend that we are isolated individuals runs counter to our experience. Confucius and Dewey affirm the fact that to be human is *to live together*.

Sharing through association with others is what provides the depth necessary to recast our lives and alter our perspectives. Transformation is the mandate governing human life. This drive towards

change is powerfully built up by our contacts with others. The quality and frequency of those associations will determine the level of human excellence we are able to attain. Our humanity is not given to us at birth. It must be earned and it is the responsibility of social orders to form the character of their members. This is why Confucius was so insistent upon the importance of developing a corps of scholar-officials to seed Chinese social and cultural life. It is also why experience, inquiry, and culture form the background of Dewey's critique of American culture.[2]

As is well known, Dewey insists on the importance of direct experience as the ultimate transformative agent. It is less well known that Confucius held a similar doctrine. The art of being human grows in direct proportion to our capacity to feel concretely the effects of our words and deeds. What we undergo and what we undertake has direct bearing on the temper of our personalities and the values that we hold. We change only to the extent that we can experience our values as constructive, deficient, appropriate or destructive.

Dewey and Confucius were fully aware of the dangers that lurked in the world of experience. Finding good outcomes is therefore an essential dimension of cultural development. It is through inquiry that satisfactory results are identified and experienced. Once again, what is meant by inquiry is far different from naive questioning or the adoption of sophisticated scientific methodologies. Investigating the structure and results of experience requires much more than the crude tools that we now use to determine the value of experience. Inquiry becomes a demanding affair that calls on every human power to determine and articulate what is really going on. What seems transparently easy turns out to be an exceptionally complex affair. This is why I substitute the phrase "felt intelligence" for the Dewey's customary term, "inquiry."

Sharing these findings and making them real for other human beings is a skill that needs constant retooling. A growing human culture requires an array of such tools. The arts are not mere cultural window dressing. They are the vital forces that weave together the shared meanings that mark a thriving culture. One must be able to make others feel what is happening before one analyzes the reasons why it is happening. A certain anesthesia creeps over societies when they are in decline. What becomes seriously enfeebled is the capacity to connect with what is going on. My opening remarks on words and

bullets serve as a concrete example of how easy it is to mistake the meaning of others.

There is another negative outcome of the failure to communicate adequately the feel of a situation and the meaning of experience. I call it "the Rise of the Great Disconnect." Our culture is characterized by a startling number of disconnects between our lives and our experience. There is no flow between what we do, what we experience, and what we say. Other ages called it alienation, but Dewey's philosophy lets us name it more directly and precisely. We are plagued by a series of separations that run from our body through our mind and spirit and then through our social order. Each split prevents our experience from becoming whole and continuous. This series of disconnects prevents our lives from building up a fund of energy and value with which to face our future and respect our past. We live in a series of "nows" that may give momentary satisfaction but ultimately prevent us from seeing our lives as whole, as connected with others and as grounded in the meanings derived from shared experience. These disconnects form the basis of our impoverished lives. For despite the great material wealth generated by Western culture, we lack a sense of genuine achievement and inner peace. The effects of the Great Disconnect echo through this book. For is it not remarkable that, despite our material success, more and more citizens of the West "go East" to locate the things that nourish the soul? It is time that serious efforts be made to bridge the gap between so-called Asian Values and Western social and political accomplishments. This study is one contribution to that project.

Any one who has watched television for an extended period of time senses this loss of intensity. Our feelings become habituated to the programs that go forward for twelve minutes and then pause and promise to return (after these messages) with more insipid activities. Of course, the networks are acutely aware of losing their audience so they regularly employ the two most powerful agents for engaging human attention—sex and violence! Similarly, what should be one of the finest hours of communication, democracy, inquiry and experience (the political talk show)—degenerates into a food fight between nincompoops. One must also mention the truncated version of discourse that has come to dominate the world of the Internet and e-mail. But the point has been made. Western culture is at a crisis stage. It seems that the only achievement our culture can fall back on is our immense

material wealth. But this accomplishment—seen in the light of the evils brought about by free market capitalism—loses its luster. And, finally, even our technological advances and medical breakthroughs are beginning to show their problematic side.

John Dewey is America's most distinguished philosopher. Confucian tradition runs throughout Asia. In bringing together these eminent cultural spokesmen, a way of living may be marked out that can reverse the downward spiral now infecting our increasingly globalized culture. Such is the hope of this essay in comparative philosophy. We need to seek and then use the "working connections" between these cultures.

I dedicate this book to the memory of David L. Hall, master of eros and irony and groundbreaking comparative philosopher. His genius has been a direct influence on my work. More than that, as a great friend, he has inspired me to do my best work. The world of philosophy has suffered a great loss with his untimely death. I also wish to acknowledge the help of Roger Ames, who urged me to write this book. Robert Neville and Chung-ying Cheng have also been trustworthy guides through the thickets of comparative philosophy. Linyu Gu has graciously supplied the Chinese glossary. Then there are the members of my Dewey seminar at the University of Hawaii, especially James Behuniak and Sor-hoon Tan, both of whom will soon be making important contributions to the growing field of Asian-American philosophy. There is also Yuri Van Mierlo, whose remarkable growth as a person and a ball player is celebrated later in this book. I am also grateful for the kindnesses of Anya and Robin. Finally, I thank Claudine for her patient love during the times this book was being written.