For over a decade, David Hall and Roger T. Ames have embraced the philosophy of John Dewey to help readers understand Confucius and Confucianism. Dewey not only shares with Confucius an aversion to fixed standards and transcendent ideals, but also shares his focus on social relations: The self ultimately is social and moral standards, socially cultivated. Above all, Dewey’s process thought seems to fit well with Confucius’ attention to the variability of circumstances and the importance of flexibility. I compare Dewey and Confucius on the topic of moral education. Here—though elsewhere as well—there are significant differences between the two. If I am right about these differences, it becomes questionable if Dewey’s philosophy is the best candidate for explaining Confucius. One should also be suspicious about appropriating Dewey’s education for democracy for the cultivation of a Confucian exemplary individual (junzi 君子).

Dewey and Confucius agree that the individual is deeply involved with others in society in ways that are crucial to his moral development. Dewey holds that we are social creatures born into families that impart particular habits and beliefs to us; we go on to be shaped by schools with their own methodologies and goals. We gradually become participants in the larger world of commerce and politics, in institutions from parishes and social clubs to cities, states, and nations. Dewey holds that our participation in these various social relations lends order through habits, and affords opportunities to gain self-control. We hence come to know ourselves by knowing our powers, possibilities, values, and principles. Dewey holds that by observing “industrial,” “national,” and familial achievements, we learn how to order our “energy, loyalty, and affection.” In short, Dewey holds that multiple social relations are prerequisite to human development.

Confucius too emphasizes social relations. Human life is never simply individual, in the Confucian view. One is always entwined in a web of relations and defined by roles such as son, father, minister, or
ruler. Playing these roles well is part of the goal of becoming the
exemplary person called, in this tradition, the “junzi.” Confucius
maintains the radical dependence of the individual upon others in
society. The social order is epitomized in customs and displayed in
condensed form in ritual. Ritual proprieties (li 禮) are the social
norms that regulate conduct. They are transmitted through history,
classical texts like the Songs and exhibited by the virtuous people
around us. It is by living in a world governed by ritual propriety that
we learn what the norms are, how they are correctly met, and learn to
feel their bindingness. Li dictates how one should behave toward
family, friends, superiors, and so on. Following li is the way to attain
the highest Confucian virtue called “authoritative conduct” or
“humanity” (ren 仁). Ren embodies all the self and other-regarding
virtues.

Dewey and Confucius agree about the importance of moral edu-
cation for self-development, and about the importance of social rela-
tions for moral education. They also agree that a cultivated self is an
expanded self who identifies his own good with the well-being of
others. Dewey sees moral development as an expansion of one’s ends
and the reconstruction of his character. Everyone is a social being
who occupies various social positions that call for certain modes of
action. These actions lead us to still further roles; for example, a
father’s relation to his child may eventually lead to a relation with the
child’s teachers, classmates, and their parents. With each growth in
relations comes a growth in duties where he is expected to expand his
field of concern beyond his already established desires and habits.
This prevents stagnation. Growth occurs when desire and duty con-

conflict, and when habits which form one’s so-far settled character con-

flict with desirable but nascent tendencies. For Dewey, the tension
between a settled past and a pregnant future is a creative tension. It
affords the possibility of the “development of a larger self, a self which
should take fuller account of social relations.”

Confucius too believes that a cultivated self promotes the good of
others. He praises generosity, protecting the young, and bringing
peace to the old. Both men believe the self expands by identifying his
or her own good first with the family, and then with others in society
in a progressive surge of enlargement. Confucius says, “someone of
ren 仁, desiring to establish oneself, establishes others (ren).”

Not only do Confucius and Dewey agree that moral education
leads to an expanded self, both also agree that the self is not a fixed
substance but is relational and in the process of formation. Arguing
against those who oppose duty to interest, Dewey maintains that such
an opposition only arises if one views the self as fixed with fixed
interests and if interest must exclude duty. For Dewey, one must be
interested in an act or he would not do it.\textsuperscript{14} He resolves this conflict between interest and duty in the following way. First, he offers a self that is not “ready-made” but is “in continuous formation through choice of action” and second, he recommends a more intimate and less instrumental relationship between “self” and “interest.”\textsuperscript{15} Third, he offers a comparably flexible sense of self-interest so that risking one’s life is not “disinterested” but an act with which the self has come to identify.

Confucius too stresses the self that one is to become, rather than a fixed self that one already is. This shows in his insistence on continual learning\textsuperscript{16} and his using heaven (\textit{tian 天}) as the model of self-cultivation.\textsuperscript{17} Due to \textit{tian}’s expansiveness, one’s cultivation has no end.\textsuperscript{18}

Dewey and Confucius seem to agree on so much—they both speak to the significance of learning throughout one’s life, the importance of adjusting to changing circumstances, and hence the futility of an appeal to abstract ethical rules. They both have a view of self that is broadly “processive” and “social.” However, more careful comparisons between their views of these issues reveal irreconcilable differences that make Dewey an unlikely guide to Confucius.

Both thinkers seem to agree that moral education is an ongoing process. Dewey thinks a commitment to process argues against external ends to which education is subordinate. Ends grow out of current situations and change as the situation changes. Insisting on fixed ends curtails moral growth because they solicit “a mechanical choice of means,”\textsuperscript{19} while allowing that moral ends change opens the door to the development of intelligence, foresight, observation, and choice. In place of fixed ends known with certainty, Dewey puts forth a “suggestive” end that is “experimental and hence constantly growing as it is tested in action.”\textsuperscript{20} End and means are relative and neither is set.\textsuperscript{21} Confucius is averse to relative ends. \textit{Ren 仁} and the rest of the Confucian virtues like courage, wisdom, etc., are goals fixed in outline if not in detail. These, unlike Dewey’s temporary and relative ends, are substantive purposes for which to strive. Whereas Confucius believes in a fairly definite set of virtues from tradition, Dewey believes that there is no fixed list of virtues. Virtues are numberless and change with time and custom.\textsuperscript{22} Ends, for Confucius, are not those satisfactions that emerge temporarily in the course of processive problem-solving; they are set by the \textit{li 禮} and by a heaven given \textit{xing 性}, not by social experiment taken to be continuous with the physical sciences.\textsuperscript{23} Confucius allows for variation in the meaning or content of virtues in two ways. First, agents must specify the virtues in appropriate ways. Second, each of the virtuous acts like \textit{ren}, wisdom, making good on one’s words, boldness, and firmness, is
coupled with a respective vice when it is not combined with an equal love of learning.  

While learning for Confucius better enables one to practice a standard set of virtues, learning for Dewey is not only for the sake of maintaining the values which sustain social interaction, but also for the sake of “extending the values which make life reasonable and good.” So he encourages individual reflection on the conventional virtues in order to seek the “real value” and avoid mere conformity which could prevent moral growth. But for Dewey, there are no “real” values independent of our own reconstructive activity; the values that make life “reasonable and social” change from context to context.

Confucius encourages moral reflection too. His complaint that the “village worthy’s” excellence (de 德) is one under false pretense shows his insistence on the real value in moral acts. The “village worthy” outwardly adheres to all social conventions regarding moral and lawful acts, but is inwardly bankrupt because he lacks the relevant attitudes and motives for those acts. Confucian li 禮 is not just a set of motions or patterns for he criticizes people who would feed their parents and defer to the elderly without the proper countenance or attitude of respect. These passages, however, do not show that there is a difference between “conventional” morality and “real” morality for Confucius, at least not in the way we use those terms today. Confucius’ emphasis on one’s real investment in performing such acts, and hence his emphasis on the real value of moral acts, is a matter of the proper way of conforming to a fairly definite set of substantive values. For Confucius, prescribed authentic standards and appropriate execution are one. This is radically different from Dewey’s experimental attitude toward conventional morality where no value is fixed, each is to be tested, and one is constantly on the look out for new values or the sudden irreverence of the old.

Another initial similarity between the two is their attention to the changing circumstances of action and their consequent denial that moral acts are achievable by following rules. Confucius emphasizes the ability to take initiative in actions. Being able to adapt oneself to various situations and do the right thing at the right time is the virtue of yi 義 (appropriateness). Moral acts then, require initiative and flexibility. Dewey would agree with this for he criticizes ethical systems that prescribe fixed rules. Some dangers of such rule-following systems are: (i) A too literal conformity to the letter of the rule ignores the uniqueness of the context; (ii) an overemphasis on avoiding punishment or pursuing reward as a motive for conduct; and (iii) a deprivation of the agent’s freedom and spontaneity by having to
conform to external authority such that loyalty and obedience become the main goods.\textsuperscript{31}

Notwithstanding the apparent affinities between these thinkers’ views about context, they actually disagree deeply about what makes an act moral. Confucius stresses two aspects of the moral act. First, it is a virtuous act conforming to authoritative \textit{li}. Second, the agent must be modest and sincere in its performance.\textsuperscript{32} Appropriate conduct requires an ability to see what a particular context needs, and an ability to execute the act with the right attitude and manner. Both the relevant act and the right attitude are prescribed by one’s roles so that the appropriate act always conforms to some \textit{li}. Though observation of authoritative custom is insufficient, Confucius insists upon such observation and he honors tradition and custom in ways that are totally foreign to Dewey. Dewey is extremely critical of conformity to custom.\textsuperscript{33} Dewey thinks that customs are bound to conflict over time as we develop incompatible habits.\textsuperscript{34} It is not that morality needs customary norms plus some “inner” element such as right attitude, or appropriate adjustments, or good manners (though Dewey does admit that “principles of judgment” such as “chastity,” “justice,” or “the golden rule” are needed). Customs and traditional norms—including the principles as interpreted—must continually give way. Neither the norms nor the principles tell us what to do in a new situation: The norms cover old situations at best, and the principles merely suggest topics for reflection which could broaden our perspectives.\textsuperscript{35} Dewey and Confucius differ then, on just what constitutes the morality of persons and acts, and in their attitudes toward custom and authority. For Confucius, a good \textit{li} has a lasting and objective moral content even if it specifies acts and roles only in outline so that good judgment, timing, a sense of the appropriate and proper attitude and style are needed. Dewey adds to this an insistence on an individual’s critical and reflective faculties.\textsuperscript{36} Whereas the morally right harmonizes with \textit{li} for Confucius, the morally right frequently conflicts with the habitual customs for Dewey.\textsuperscript{37}

Though Dewey and Confucius agree on the necessity of a good political system for moral education, they differ on what kind is desirable. For Dewey, a democratic form of government is best since it allows for a greater diversity of interests and freer interactions between social groups. This diversity and freedom provide more opportunities for moral growth.\textsuperscript{38} Confucius, on the other hand, finds rule by an exemplary individual to be ideal. Modeling politics after the family, he believes in the rule of a virtuous emperor who loves his people like children.\textsuperscript{39} Such a \textit{junzi}-ruler system is exactly the kind of one-sided stimulus Dewey opposes. Moreover, unlike Dewey’s insistence on equality, Confucius relies on a hierarchical society of rulers...
and ministers, fathers and sons. Such a system functions smoothly as long as each person plays his roles. But it would fail Dewey’s ideal of free interaction between different social groups leading to a continual readjustment of habits. Confucius thinks that most people are incapable of becoming fully virtuous and hence being suitable politicians. Consequently, the majority need to be taken care of and be led well to have their fullest share in the moral life. This seems paternalistic to us: Even if it is true that most people will lack in virtue if we let them run loose in a highly mobile, tradition-criticizing society, at least they have their freedom. Again, it is too easy for us to separate the moral and political questions and relegate the political preferences of these men to the sides of history. But Dewey and Confucius both insist on a radical entwinement of ethics and politics. What I highlight here as differences are integral to each view. To Dewey’s credit, he faces this issue head on and argues that a democratic society of free equals will tend to produce more opportunities for virtue and a more ethical society on the whole. Dewey would call Confucius’ society at best “rudimentary” (at worst regressive), for the moral, political, and legal spheres are not distinguished, so that “morality” is just the socially established. Such a society’s morality would be partial, and its people would become intolerant with stunted reflective and critical powers. Confucius might respond that most people cannot usually handle as much freedom as Dewey prescribes. The claim that a “given” society provides more opportunities for choice and character development must remain abstract. Moreover, Confucius would see that high rates of mobility tend to uproot individuals from the settled places and roles that are the soil of virtue. Hence, Confucius would regard Dewey’s relational selves as increasingly abstract precisely because of this moral-political condition of mobility. Since the self is relational, once those relations change rapidly, the self they shape will tend to be increasingly disintegrated and insubstantial and its relationships increasingly superficial, since relationships and moral qualities will not have time to penetrate and congeal. Of course, Dewey does not advocate such disintegration, but a Confucian would take it to be a consequence of a Deweyan approach.

In light of these disagreements between Dewey and Confucius regarding the virtues, the place of criticism and reflection, attitude toward custom and tradition and assessment of political system, we should revisit their apparent agreements about the moral self. Though in the abstract we can say they agree on a “process” and “relational” or “social” view of the self, they disagree radically about its ends and means. The Confucian self, exhausted by its roles, is a “selfless” self because what is right is always already prescribed so that one needs, at most, a choice of means and not of ends. This is at odds with
Dewey’s view that the self is one’s interests and yet is to be critical of one’s interests. This Deweyan self is hence a restless self, always on the move, ever seeking to introduce more change into an already changing world, critical of conventional values hyper-reflective and creator of his own ideals. Dewey would find Confucius subordinating the individual to his social roles and class. Moreover, he would complain against Confucius’ finding the uniqueness of an individual in her manner or style of appropriating tradition, rather than in her freedom from and critical transformation of it. Contrariwise, Confucius would find the Deweyan self’s obsession with its own self-reconstruction a hindrance to its moral development. This is because the way to the moral life is clear from the li. All one needs is to follow authentic custom with sincerity. To ignore this is like “trying to take your stand with your face to the wall.”

For Dewey, “only diversity makes change and progress” and innovation is of the essence. Confucius says that he does not innovate, but transmits. He thinks that the social ideal has been achieved in the Zhou li and all we need is to realize it. Again, he maintains that he is a follower of the proper way rather than an initiator of new paths. Dewey, on the other hand, believes in endless change and the ever-widening of common concerns, due to changes in science, technology, trade, and travel. These changes are opportunities for progress because they are opportunities for social and individual reconstruction. Instead of reverting to an idealized past, Dewey welcomes these liberalizing modernizations. Above all, Dewey encourages the kind of education that reflects these liberalizing modernizations and encourages them. He stresses an education for “social efficiency.” Education must lead to economic independence by enabling one to earn his own living, and to use effectively the products of industry. Beyond that, one must also acquire civic efficiency by learning how to make and obey laws. Above all, individuals must be educated to be unique individuals able to make intelligent choices among a diversity of goods. In Dewey’s words, “if democracy has a moral and ideal meaning, it is that a social return be demanded from all and that opportunity for development of distinctive capacities be afforded all.” Such a society would also protect an individual’s freedom to act and move, as well as his more specific rights. Confucius would find Dewey preoccupied with the economic and practical concerns; those are, in his view, concerns proper only to petty persons. He would also disapprove of Dewey’s view of civic responsibility, and the rule of law, since laws are abstract and only lead people to avoid punishments instead of ordering themselves through customs which are concrete. Finally, he would be puzzled by Dewey’s obsession with freedom and mobility since it is through
appropriation of *li* and cultivation through this appropriation that one grows the moral life.

Having shown how Dewey’s process philosophy and his view on education do not fit snugly with Confucius’ view of education, let me address some of Hall and Ames’ arguments in *The Democracy of the Dead* concerning the relevance of Dewey’s democracy and his education for democracy for Confucius and a Confucian tradition.

Hall and Ames claim that Dewey’s communitarian view of democracy is relevant to the Chinese context for three reasons. First, his view is the most profound of contemporary communitarians’ accounts. Second, Dewey’s account “provides novel and constructive proposals” with “a minimum of harsh rhetoric.” And third, Dewey was the first intellectual from the modern West who visited and lectured in China. Hall and Ames say, “[h]is rather dramatic, if short-lived, influence on China’s social and educational institutions argues for the relevance of his thought to the Chinese context.”

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the specific reasons and situations which led to Dewey’s short-lived influence on China’s social, political, and educational institutions. Rather, I am interested in pointing out why most of Hall and Ames’ claims for the relevance of Dewey’s views to Confucius are not supported by Dewey’s own claims, or by Confucius’ view, or by the way his American educated Chinese students like Hu Shih and Chiang Meng-lin have appropriated his philosophy.

In chapter 6 of *The Democracy of the Dead*, entitled “John Dewey’s Democracy,” Hall and Ames start out by dissociating democracy from capitalism and associating activities of science and technology with democracy for Dewey. They say that capitalism aims to maximize profit and is consistent with an understanding of the self that is “discrete and autonomous.” This makes capitalism a hindrance to the formation of democratic communities. Activities of science and technology on the other hand, Hall and Ames maintain, are conducive to cooperative interactions because they lead to “the most efficient and effective instrumentation of a set of ideas [or ends].” Thus, science and technology, according to Hall and Ames, are conducive to the formation of democratic communities. On the face of it, since Confucius emphasizes social relations, Hall and Ames’ reading of the communitarian and democratic effects of Dewey’s view on science and technology makes Dewey’s view quite palatable to Confucius. However, we have already seen earlier that Confucius would find preoccupation with efficiency and things practical to be appropriate for petty persons rather than the *junzi*君子.
people to be junzi, encourage them to engage in the petty activities
that form the mainstay of Dewey’s scientific and technological mode
of life.

Hall and Ames next point out that language is central to our expe-
rience in a democratic community for it enables us to participate in
communal activities, communicate and achieve “the ends of associ-
ated living.” Dewey’s community producing language, Hall and
Ames maintain, is not a kind of rational discourse. Rather, it is “fun-
damentally aesthetic in character” and appeals to our imagination and
emotion. “The expressions that constitute art are communication in
its pure and undefiled form,” quote Hall and Ames to support their
claim that communication is fundamentally aesthetic rather than
rational for Dewey. In short, they assert that aesthetic activities, for
Dewey, occasion emotionally shared experiences that are not only
conducive to the development of democratic communities, but are
more “profound” and more “productive” than the intellectual sharing
of common principles quite independent of “common feeling.”

In spite of their prioritizing the aesthetic character of communica-
tion for Dewey, Hall and Ames had to expand Dewey’s account of
communication to include the more practical and “rational” modes of
discourse that take place in institutional and technological activities.
They say, “[t]he pragmatist wishes to promote those forms of social
engagement and interaction that optimize communication. This effort
requires a general interest in the character of communication, from its
fundamentally evocative and aesthetic modes of expression to the
institutional forms and technologies that promote or retard creative
interactions.” They do not offer an explanation whether these insti-
tutional and technological modes of discourse are rational or not. But
a look at Dewey’s own “Creative Democracy—The Task before Us”
suggests not only that communication is mostly rational, but also
that rational communication is the norm of all communication for
Dewey. This stems from Dewey’s belief that democracy is a way of
life that expresses faith in the educative process of experience, where
experience is that of the free interaction of human beings with the
way things are in their surrounding (i.e., facts). This is contrary to the
aesthetic experience Hall and Ames offer. In Dewey’s words, experience
is “that free interaction of individual human beings with sur-
rounding conditions . . . which develops and satisfies need and desire
by increasing knowledge of things as they are” (The Philosopher of
the Common Man, 227). Put otherwise, Dewey says, “[k]nowledge of
conditions as they are is the only solid ground for communication
and sharing; all other communication means the subjection of some
persons to the personal opinion of other persons.” Again, he says,
“[f]or what is the faith of democracy in the role of consultation, of

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conference, of persuasion, of discussion, in formation of public opinion, which in the long run is self-corrective, except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with common sense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly, and free communication? Given that Dewey relates communication (in the forms of consultation, conference, persuasion, and discussion) in forming public opinion to knowledge of conditions as they are, such that the intelligence of common man is employed in responding to facts, it is highly unlikely that communication is not rational for him. Because Dewey maintains that experience is an unending process of relating means and ends, which relations require the use of intelligence directed at facts, communication about these facts must be rational or the means–ends relations would simply be arbitrary. Rational discourse then is the norm of communication for Dewey, contrary to Hall and Ames’ evocative and aesthetic norms.

Hall and Ames overemphasize the aesthetic aspect of experience and communication for Dewey in the interest of attaining resonance with Confucius’ elevation of the nonverbal and aesthetic character of rituals and music, which are key to the cultivation of personhood in the community. Due to Dewey’s own scientific emphasis on experience and communication, which are not only nourished by democracy but also productive of it, it is unlikely that Hall and Ames can, with justice, substitute aesthetic for rational discourse for Dewey, and appropriate Dewey’s democracy for Confucius by pointing out their kinship on communication’s being aesthetic.

Another difference in Dewey’s and Confucius’ use of communication stems from the goal that each thinker envisions for communication. Dewey’s free communication based on facts provide for free interaction with facts which act as means for generating the temporary end of science, which in turn serves as a means to further experience which generates still more scientific knowledge, and so forth. Science, Dewey says, is “the sole dependable authority for the direction of further experience and which releases emotions, needs, and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past.” Otherwise put, Dewey’s brand of communication serves the purpose of science, which serves the purpose of creating things that have not existed before. As Dewey puts it in Individualism Old and New, “the general adoption of the scientific attitude in human affairs would mean nothing less than a revolutionary change in morals, religion, politics and industry.” Contrary to Dewey’s stress of creating the novel through the process of communication, Confucius’ take on communication is not creative of the novel, but rather, is one that conforms to the virtues. For instance, Confucius says, “How could one
but comply with what model sayings have to say? But the real value lies in reforming one’s ways.”\textsuperscript{80} Instead of creating something that has never existed before, as in Dewey’s ultimate aim of communication, Confucius’ aim is to have the listener change himself so as to conform to the virtue that is being articulated in the model saying, which virtue is exercised, when the situation demands, by everyone who has that virtue. This is consistent with Confucius’ own description of himself as a follower rather than an initiator of new paths.\textsuperscript{81} Due to the two differences between Dewey and Confucius on communication, which communication is not only promoted by, but also promotes democracy for Dewey, it is questionable if Dewey’s democracy is relevant to Confucius and Confucianism.

Let me turn now to examine if Hall and Ames’ account of Dewey’s democratic individual in this chapter is compatible with Confucius’ understanding of the individual. Hall and Ames point out that Dewey and other American pragmatists characterize experience in a social way such that “the fullest form of human life is life together.”\textsuperscript{82} They continue by saying that for Dewey, “assured and integrated individuality is . . . the product of definite social relationships and publicly acknowledged functions.”\textsuperscript{83} Hence, they maintain that for Dewey, it is through an individual’s roles and functions in the society that she gains a sense of achievement as opposed to the capitalistic “private pecuniary gain.”\textsuperscript{84} So far, Hall and Ames’ Dewey who emphasizes the social aspect of an individual’s development and achievement should be quite palatable to Confucius.

The next task that Hall and Ames undertake is to explain Dewey’s notion of freedom and autonomy. Freedom for Dewey, they maintain, is to be efficacious rather than abstract. This means that individuals are free only when the conditions that promote their actions are realized. As such, they say that Dewey’s view is that: “Members of communities are responsible for maximizing their fellows’ opportunities to make decisions and perform actions that . . . enrich the community.”\textsuperscript{85} They add that the same ends are shared by government officials in a democratic society. Nevertheless, Hall and Ames recognize that for Dewey, “enrichment of the community is not an end in itself.”\textsuperscript{86} Rather, “[t]he end of communal interaction is the enrichment of the individual.”\textsuperscript{87} Because the individual is always an individual in context, Hall and Ames claim that “freedom” and “autonomy,” for Dewey, are “no longer defined in terms of independent agency, but of interdependent activity.”\textsuperscript{88} By emphasizing the individual’s reliance on the social, Hall and Ames manage to paint a Deweyan individual that is much like the Confucian junzi 君子 who establishes himself as he establishes others,\textsuperscript{89} who enriches the community that in turn enriches himself. Nevertheless, Hall and Ames neglected to tell us that Dewey
has a preference for a distinctive kind of interdependent activity that takes place under a distinctive set of conditions, or in a certain kind of society, and issues forth in a distinctive kind of individual—one who is creative, unique, and original.

The kind of interdependent activity Dewey has in mind involves “controlled use of all the resources of the science and technology that have mastered the physical forces of nature.” Such interdependent activities take place in a society where traditional values are not only irrelevant but major obstacles to the formation of Dewey’s new individual. “A new culture expressing the possibilities immanent in a machine and material civilization” is the kind of social backdrop for Dewey’s new interdependent activity. Finally, Dewey’s new individuals will be freed by the new conditions so that their distinctive and creative potential will be unleashed to create a “continuously new society,” and a continuously new individual. As Dewey puts it, “[n]o individual can make the determination for anyone else; nor can he make it for himself all at once and forever... The selective choice and use of conditions have to be continually made and remade.”

The master who characterizes himself as a follower instead of an innovator of new paths will not be too sanguine about Dewey’s enthusiasm for a continually new individual and society. Confucius thinks that the ideal form of life has been captured by the Zhou Dynasty and we should strive to recapture this tradition by cultivating its rituals (li). Instead of maximizing our fellows’ opportunities to make decisions and perform actions that will enrich the community (which means that everyone ought to become technologically savvy for Dewey), Confucius is content with a hierarchical approach where rulers rule, ministers serve, and “the common people do not debate affairs of the state.” Far from Dewey’s “democracy begins at home,” quoted by Hall and Ames, Confucius’ approach is that “hierarchy begins at home”; the community will be well governed if everyone stuck to his role and performed what is ritualistic for his role. He says, “[t]he ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son.” Contrary to the constant change in the individual and society that Dewey celebrates, Confucius prefers the stability in performing what is traditionally appropriate for one’s roles. Confucius believes that it is one’s ability to carry out duties at home toward one’s family members that can lead one to attain the highest virtue of humanity (ren). It is by choosing the same filial, respectful, and loyal behavior toward one’s family and friends that enables one to achieve the virtuous character that can be extended to others in the broader community. The point, once again for Confucius, is not the cultivation of a self that is free to create things that are radically new, but rather, conformity to a tradition which aids the cultivation of a
virtuous self. Dewey’s democratic individual will not appeal to Confucius because he would disagree with Dewey’s interactive activity involving science and technology, with his social conditions of machine and material civilization that facilitate these activities, as well as disagree with the resulting unstable creative and unique new individual who is not wedded to any tradition of virtue.

My final analysis of Hall and Ames’ chapter on Dewey’s democracy will examine their discussion of Dewey’s view of tradition and education. They stress Dewey’s recognition of the power of customs, habits, and tradition for undertaking intelligent action. They report that Dewey maintains that traditional habits and customs may become obsolete when they do not catch up with the objective conditions (mostly technological) that have changed. Dewey’s education for democracy, Hall and Ames maintain, strives to sharpen intelligence which will determine which habits and traditions are relevant to the present social conditions. Ultimately, Hall and Ames claim that all education is moral for Dewey because it aims to “realize common goods” and “sensitize individuals to goods-in-common.”

As before, such general statements about Dewey’s view of tradition and education sound rather similar to Confucius’ view. Confucius too stresses the significance of tradition in the moral education of the individual, and maintains that the aim of education is to extend one’s care for his family to others in the community. However, a closer look at Dewey’s more specific claims about the irrelevance of traditional ideas, his skepticism toward any attempts to “erect a hierarchy of values,” and his claim that the adoption of a scientific attitude means a revolutionary change in morals and politics should cause us to pause before embracing a Deweyan brand of democracy and education for Confucius.

The revolutionary change, though evolutionary, will result in a society that undermines Confucianism at its core. Consider Hall and Ames’ rather conservative assertion that “basic modes of association such as the family and voluntary groupings all have an educative function” for Dewey. Now compare this with Dewey’s own lecture at Beida in the autumn of 1919 while answering the question about where they should begin in reforming their society: “My answer is that we must start by reforming the component institutions of the society. Families, schools, local governments, the central government—all these must be reformed. . . . Any claim of the total reconstruction of a society is almost certain to be misleading.”

Though Dewey did not specify the “improvement” that can be made to these institutions, one of his students, Chiang Meng-lin, editor of Hsin Chiao-yü (The New Education), supplied the details. Barry Keenan reports Chiang’s view:
The independent dignity of each individual must be recognized, ... in place of the traditional deference required by the five Confucian relationships. ... Chiang attacked the hierarchy of social values based on the family system that extended outward to the emperor and his officials. In its place he recommended that all people be treated simply as “you,” “he,” and “she,” giving each person his or her inherent dignity. Chiang noted that modern educators all agreed that the point of departure in educating a child should be to develop his or her individuality ... which was ... essential to the positive values of freedom and equality in modern democracy.  

Chiang even attacked the Confucian virtue of humaneness (ren 仁), maintaining that it is “antithetical to the spirit of democracy sweeping the world” because despite its “ideal of peace,” it treated the people like sheep shepherded by the one with ren. Chiang’s critique of Confucianism is consistent with Hu Shih’s (another student of Dewey) “untraditional vision of the ultimate social purpose to be served.” Hu Shih wrote in *The New Youth* in 1918: “A self-governing society and a republican nation require only that the individual have the right to choose freely, and furthermore that he bear the responsibility for his own conduct and actions ... [o]therwise he certainly does not possess the ability to create his own independent character.” Grieder notes that neither the pluralistic social values that are being advocated by Hu Shih, nor the proposed educational reforms to attain these ends, are comprehensible by any Confucian.

Dewey’s short-lived influence on China’s social and educational institutions, as pointed out by Hall and Ames, coupled with the way that his Chinese students have interpreted and appropriated his philosophy, are more revealing of the distance between Dewey’s and Confucius’ thoughts about education and its purposes than Hall and Ames’ account in their chapter on Dewey’s democracy would have us believe. There are definite affinities between these thinkers’ emphasis on the social and its relevance for cultivating the person, but there are also drastic differences that surround their visions of the human good and how that is to be accomplished. These differences pose a challenge to the wholesale appropriation of Dewey’s democracy and his education for democracy for Confucius and Confucian societies.

Much of Dewey’s and Confucius’ disagreement turns on a differing assessment of tradition and its role in the moral life. Dewey believes that the Confucian sacralizing of tradition is a source of stagnation and a bar to what he calls “growth.” Confucius, for his part, might see that while Dewey acknowledges custom in a complex situation that binds past and future (while strongly stressing the future), this whole complex is part of a li 礼. This li includes the style of “self” (the liberal style: critical yet tolerant, transactional yet individualistic, open to and
productive of more change and more relativity) and manner of interaction (personal, egalitarian, emotionally open, and demanding a contractarian fairness in dealing). On this view, Dewey’s debt to tradition and a particular set of rituals was far greater than he admitted.

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ENDNOTES

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1. See David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, Thinking through Confucius (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). They say, “[I]f contemporary comparative philosophic activity is any indication, it might be the pragmatic philosophies associated with Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead, and extended toward a process philosophy such as that of A. N. Whitehead, that can serve as the best resource for philosophical concepts and doctrines permitting responsible access to Confucius’ thought” (15). See also David Hall and Roger T. Ames, Thinking from the Han (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 6, 145, 218, 280–81, approving the use of Dewey in particular. Finally, see David Hall and Roger T. Ames, The Democracy of the Dead: Dewey, Confucius, and the Hope for Democracy in China (Peru: Open Court, 1999), where they maintain that Dewey’s brand of democracy is the brand best suited to Chinese culture and most likely to take root there. I discuss why Dewey’s democracy and education for democracy is not suitable for Confucianism later.


3. Dewey thinks that without the “social medium” an individual would only be capable of leading an animalistic life which at best satisfies his bodily appetites like sex, food, and drink. He holds that an isolated individual “would never ‘know himself’: he would never become acquainted with his own needs and capacities” (John Dewey,
For Dewey, we learn about our own creative possibilities by seeing great architecture and listening to beautiful music. As Dewey puts it,

Only in participating in already fashioned systems of conduct does he apprehend his own powers, appreciate their worth and realize their possibilities, and achieve for himself a controlled and orderly body of physical and mental habits. He finds the value and the principles of his life, his satisfaction and his norms of authority, in being a member of associated groups of persons and in playing his part in their maintenance and expansion. (MW 5, 386–87, see also 389)

See The Analects where Confucius states his goal as follows:

I would like to bring peace and contentment to the aged, to share relationships of trust and confidence with my friends, and to love and protect the young. (5.26)

Confucius praises the ability to relate well to others when he remarks of Zichan that, [H]e was gracious in deporting himself, he was deferential in serving his superiors, he was generous in attending to needs of the common people, and he was appropriate (yi 賦) in employing their services. (5.16)

See also The Analects 5.17 where he praises Pingzhong Yen for being very good in relating to others. This is evident in his respectful treatment of old friends. See also 1.4, 1.6, and 1.7 for other passages supporting the significance of relating well to others.


7. See Fingarette for how li 礼 is intimately bound up with a learned social convention. He says, “[t]here is no power of li if there is no learned and accepted convention, or if we utter the words and invoke the power of the convention in an inappropriate setting, or if the ceremony is not fully carried out, or if the persons carrying out the ceremonial roles are not those properly authorized” (63). See Herbert Fingarette, “Human Community as Holy Rite: An Interpretation of Confucius’ Analects,” Harvard Theological Review 59 (1966): 53–67.

8. Confucius says, “[t]hrough self-discipline and observing li 礼 one becomes authoritative in one’s conduct” (12.1). He goes on, in this passage, to make the negative point that one becomes ren 仁 by not looking at, listening to, speaking about, or doing anything that violates the observance of li. See my “Ritual and Realism,” op. cit., or chapter 3 of Remastering Morals for how li is not merely a social phenomenon, but is also aligned with the nonhuman. Hence, li is not antithetical to knowledge of the natural world for Confucius (see 17.9).

9. See The Analects 4.3, 4.4, 15.10, and 17.6 for the sense that ren 仁 is the embodiment of all the virtues. See 6.30 for how one with ren establishes himself and others. As Wei-ming Tu puts it, “ren symbolizes a holistic manifestation of humanity in its commonest and highest state of perfection.” See Wei-ming Tu, Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation (Albany: State University of New York Press,

10. MW 5, 327.

11. Dewey says,

The value of continually having to meet the expectations and requirements of others is in keeping the agent from resting on his oars, from falling back on habits already formed as if they were final. (MW 5, 327)

12. MW 5, 312. Dewey emphasizes again the need for considering others in genuine altruism by saying,

To include in our view of the consequences the needs and possibilities of others on the same basis as our own, is to take the only course which will give an adequate view of the situation. There is no situation into which these factors do not enter. To have a generous view of others is to have a larger world in which to act. (MW 5, 349)

See also p. 357 where he stresses the formation of a self where “socialized desires and affections are dominant” in moral life.

13. 6.30. This interdependence between self- and other-cultivation is also clear in 4.5 where Confucius’ way is explained as doing one’s best (zhong忠) and putting oneself in another’s place (shu恕). Wing-tsit Chan follows Zhuxi and explains that “Zhong means the full development of one’s . . . mind and shu means the extension of that mind to others” (A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963], 27). Such acts are done for the sake of others rather than for one’s selfish gain (4.12, 4.16) even though they also make one ren仁.

Ren仁 is a virtue that is concerned for the other’s good. Confucius says that ren conduct is to “love others” and knowledge is to “know others” (12.22, see also 17.4). Only when one knows the others can he act appropriately toward them. For instance, when Zilu and Ranyou both asked Confucius the same question, namely, whether one should act upon what one has learned, he gave the opposite response to each. When another student asked why he did that, he replied, “Ranyou is diffident, and so I urge him on. But Zilu has the energy of two, and so I sought to rein him in” (11.22).

14. MW 9, 361.

15. As he puts it, “[t]he mistake lies in making a separation between interest and self, and supposing that the latter is the end to which interest in objects and acts and others is a mere means. In fact, self and interest are two names for the same fact.” See John Dewey, The Middle Works of John Dewey, vol. 9, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 361. Hereinafter, “MW 9.”

16. The Analects 17.8, 5.28.


18. Numerous Confucian commentators not only recognize that Confucius has no doctrine of a metaphysical self, but also urge that he propounds the cultivation of selflessness or a self as totality of relational roles view. Fingarette says of Confucius’ use of the “self” that his “usage reveals no explicit doctrines of a metaphysical or psychological kind about the details of structure of will, or the processes internal to the individual’s control of the will.” See Herbert Fingarette, “The Problem of the Self in the Analects,” Philosophy East and West 29, no. 2 (1979): 129–40. Similarly, both Ames and Rosemont eschew any fixed human nature in Confucius and opt for a relational self that is exhausted by its roles. See Roger T. Ames, “The Focus-Field Self in Classical Confucianism,” in Self as Person in Asian Theory and Practice, ed. Roger T. Ames, Wimal Dissanayake, and Thomas Kasulis (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 187–212, see 198; and Henry Rosemont, “Rights-Bearing Individuals and Role-Bearing Persons,” in Rules, Rituals, and Responsibility: Essays Dedicated to Herbert Fingarette, ed. Mary I. Bockover (La Salle: Open Court, 1991), 71–102, see 90. See my “The Moral Self,” op. cit., or chapter 5 of Remastering Morals for my take on this issue. Sympathetic with my view that there is already a meta-

19. MW 9, 111.
20. MW 9, 112.
21. He says, “every means is a temporary end until we have attained it. Every end becomes a means of carrying activity further as soon as it is achieved” (MW 9, 113).
22. Dewey says,

[T]he meaning or content, of virtues changes from time to time . . . when institutions and customs change and natural abilities are differently stimulated and evoked, ends vary, and habits of character are differently esteemed both by the individual agent and by others who judge. (MW 5, 360)

Dewey offers three reasons for the impossibility of cataloguing virtues. They are:

1. The intimate connection of virtues with all sorts of individual capacities and endowments;
2. The change in types of habit required with change of social customs and institutions;
3. The dependence of judgment of vice and virtue upon the character of the one judging, make undesirable and impossible a catalogued list of virtues with an exact definition of each. Virtues are numberless. Every situation, not of a routine order, brings in some special shading, some unique adaptation, of disposition. (MW 5, 362)

23. See my “Harmony and the Mean,” op. cit., or chapter 4 of Remastering Morals for more details on the relation between xing 性 and tian 天.
26. MW 5, 361. For instance, Dewey explains that moral knowledge, as an aspect of virtue, is “the completeness of the interest in good exhibited in effort to discover the good” (MW 5, 377, my emphasis), and pursuit is preferred over possession because of the dual disadvantage of fixity and superiority in class associated with the notion of possession. See also MW 5, 347 where he says, “there are no motives which in and of themselves are right; that any tendency, whether original instinct or acquired habit, requires sanction from the special consequences which, in the special situation, are likely to flow from it.”
27. The Analects 17.3.
28. The Analects 2.7–2.8. For more details on Confucian li 惟, see my “Categories and Commensurability,” op. cit., or chapter 2 of Remastering Morals.
29. He says,

If people can recite all of the three hundred Songs and yet when given official responsibility, fail to perform effectively, or when sent to distant quarters, are unable to act on their own initiative, then even though they have mastered so many of them, what good are they to them? (13.5)

30. Confucius says, “Exemplary persons (junzi 君子) in making their way in the world are neither bent on nor against anything; rather, they go with what is appropriate (yi 義)” (4.10). I explain three senses in Confucius’ use of yi in my “Aristotle in the Reconstruction of Confucian Ethics,” op. cit., or chapter 1 of Remastering Morals. They are: (i) The disposition or virtue which leads the junzi to act rightly in particular situations (4.16, 4.11); (ii) the individual act actualizing this disposition (15.18, 4.10); and (iii) the virtue of yi, i.e., a universal standard shared by the community conversant with li 惟 (2.24, 7.16).
31. MW 5, 296–97.
32. Confucius says,

Having a sense of appropriate conduct (yi 義) as one’s basic disposition, developing it in observing ritual propriety (li 惟), expressing it with modesty, and consummating it in making good on one’s word (xin 信): this then is an exemplary person. (15.8)
33. Dewey says.

To take the rules of the past with any literalness as criteria of judgment in the present, would be to return to the unprogressive morality of the regime
of custom—to surrender the advance marked by reflective morality. (MW 5, 300)

34. See earlier discussion of how a self grows and expands only through conflicts of duty and desire.

35. MW 5, 301–2. Confucius too has a notion of the golden rule in his virtue of reciprocity (shu 諸). Shu means that “you do not impose on others what you yourself do not want” (15.24, 12.2). This, however, is unlike Dewey’s principles of judgment in that it is not just one among other perspectives for deliberation but rather, it is the perspective (4.15). Much like yi 義, this perspective should lead to the right act which is already prescribed by one’s role and li 禮.


37. It might seem obvious that this difference is merely situational—not a matter of fundamentally differing moral sensibilities, but similar sensibilities situated in a stable relatively unchanging traditional society, and a modern fast-moving fast-changing market society, respectively. Though the contrast between traditional and market societies is apt, it misses two points: First, Confucius lived in a quite turbulent period (or the end of one); second, a Confucian sensibility is quite capable of perceiving consequences of the modern liberal mode—a version of which is championed by Dewey—and criticizing it to fruitfulness, acting as a seedbed for substantive norms and moral virtue.

38. MW 9, 92.

39. His rule is effective in virtue of his own authoritative conduct (ren 仁). As Confucius puts it,

Governing with excellence (de 德) can be compared to being the North Star: the North Star dwells in its place, and the multitude of stars pay it tribute. (2.1)

Again, he says,

Lead them with excellence (de) and keep them orderly through observing ritual propriety (li 禮) and they will develop a sense of shame, and moreover, will order themselves. (2.3)

See also 12.19 where Confucius says, “the junzi 君子 is the wind; the petty person the grass. When the wind blows, the grass will surely bend” (my translation).

40. Confucius says, “[t]he ruler must rule, the minister minister, the father father, and the son son” (12.11).


42. Ibid. 13.3.

43. MW 5, 389.

44. In contrast, Confucius would maintain that obedience and responsibility to one’s parents and brothers prepare obedience and loyalty to one’s ethical superiors (1.2). And if the sovereign is in turn a junzi 君子, then such subordination could only perpetuate the li 禮 of civilization.

45. Herbert Fingarette, in “A Way without a Crossroads,” *Confucius: The Secular as Sacred* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1972), 18–36, points out that Confucius does not use the language of choice and responsibility for these are bound up with “the idea of the ontologically ultimate power of the individual to select from genuine alternatives to create his own spiritual destiny” (18). Again, he says, “the problem of genuine choice among real alternatives never occurred to Confucius, or at least never clearly occurred to him as a fundamental moral task. Confucius merely announces the way he sees the matter, putting it tactfully by saying it is the custom in li 禮. There is nothing to suggest a decisional problem; everything suggests that there is a defect of knowledge, a simple error of moral judgment” (23, see also 34). See T. H. Ruskola’s “Moral Choice in the Analects: A Way without a Crossroads?” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 19, no. 3 (1992): 285–96, for an interpretation of how such a way does not permit a choice of ends but nonetheless permits a choice of means.

46. Dewey says,

Our “ideals,” our types of excellence, are the various ways in which we figure to ourselves the outreaching and ever-expanding values of our
concrete acts. . . . An ideal is not some remote all exhaustive goal, a fixed sum- 
mum bonum with respect to which other things are only means . . . [it] is the conviction that each of these special situations carries with it a 
final value, a meaning which in itself is unique and inexhaustible. (MW 5, 378)
47. The Analects 17.10.
48. MW 9, 96.
50. Ibid. 7.1, 7.28.
51. MW 9, 93.
52. MW 9, 369.
53. MW 9, 126.
54. MW 9, 127.
55. MW 9, 129. Marxists hear in this an echo of Marx’s “from each according to his 
abilities; to each according to his needs.” However, Marxists also hear in Dewey’s 
talk of social efficiency, a fair deal between individuals in society and unending 
“growth,” echoes of a market culture Dewey failed to criticize sufficiently. A Chinese 
scholar weaned on Confucius and Marx might even see in this evidence of a li of 
modernity more lasting than Dewey recognized in shaping his thought more deeply 
than he recognized. From this perspective, it looks as if Dewey’s most radical pro-
posal are less critical and transformative of this li than accepting and reinforcing of it—much as Confucius might have predicted.
56. MW 5, 392–94.
57. The Analects 4.16.
58. Ibid. 2.3.
59. DD hereinafter.
60. DD 118.
61. Ibid.
62. See Youzhong Sun’s “John Dewey in China: Yesterday and Today,” Transactions of 
influence or lack of influence on China from 1919 to the 1980s.
63. See Barry Keenan’s The Dewey Experiment in China (Cambridge: Harvard Univer-
sity Press, 1977); and Jerome B. Grieder’s Intellectuals and the State in Modern China 
(New York: The Free Press, 1981), for details on these students.
64. DD 121.
65. DD 120.
66. The Analects 4.16.
67. DD 124.
68. DD 124.
69. DD 124.
70. DD 125.
71. DD 126.
72. DD 126.
Works, 1925–1953, volume 14, ed. J. Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Uni-
74. The Philosopher of the Common Man: Essays in Honor of John Dewey to Celebrate 
His Eightieth Birthday (New York: Greenwood, 1940).
75. The Philosopher of the Common Man, 227, my italics.
76. The Philosopher of the Common Man, 224, my italics. See Keenan’s The Dewey 
Experiment in China, emphasizing this very point when he says that scientific inves-
tigation for Dewey involves “publicity, public discussion, observation and investiga-
tion” that made people “more able and willing to observe the truth” (40). Keenan 
goes on to maintain that accordingly, Dewey’s experimental method is one that 
depends on the “extensive public dissemination of objective facts,” not only about 
nature but concerning social and political issues too (41).
77. The Analects 8.2, 12.1, 3.23.
78. The Philosopher of the Common Man, 228.
82. DD 126.
83. DD 126.
84. DD 127.
85. DD 127.
86. DD 127.
87. DD 127.
88. DD 129.
90. ION, 93.
91. ION, 143.
92. ION, 167.
95. DD, 132.
99. DD 132–33.
100. DD 134–35.
101. DD 138.
102. DD 137.
103. ION, 93.
104. ION, 141.
105. ION, 155.
108. Ibid.
110. Ibid., 275.
111. Ibid. See also Tsai Yuan-pei’s (President of National Peking University) account of the radical differences between Dewey and Confucius regarding social issues in his introduction of Dewey at a banquet in honor of Dewey’s birthday, which coincided with Confucius’ 2470th birthday on the lunar calendar (Keenan, *The Dewey Experiment in China*, 10–11).