

Symposium on Naoko Saito's *American Philosophy in Translation*

"Digging at the Roots: A Reply to Naoko Saito's *American Philosophy in Translation*"

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The two and a half years Dewey lived in Japan and China offered him an East-West comparative standpoint to examine Euro-American presuppositions. In subsequent work he took steps in the direction of a global philosophical outlook by promoting a fusion of aesthetic refinements with democratic experimentalism. 2021 marks the centennial of Dewey's return to the United States, yet philosophers in this country have only begun to take in an emerging global philosophical scene that includes unfamiliar questions, angles, idioms, and emphases. In a sense, as Gregory Pappas has observed in the context of American philosophies, pragmatism did not "grow up" in the United States. As a coherent philosophy it *originated* there, and it is now growing up through critical and mutually transformative intra-cultural dialogue (Pappas; cf. Behuniak).

As pragmatism continues growing up, we can bear Thoreau's words in mind: "I know of few radicals as yet who are radical enough." He was implying, in an implicit jab at Emerson, that the radicals of his day did not dig deep enough, down to the level of their conceptual roots, to inspect them in order to transform their own lives (qtd Walls 168-169). Thoreau expressed this radicalism through "an iconic work of performance art" (Walls 194) in 1845-47, living on the shore of Walden Pond. Like Thoreau, in *American Philosophy in Translation* Naoko Saito digs deep, exposing the originating roots of pragmatism to criticism "with the result that its identity is translated" to meet contemporary conditions (Saito 72).

Approaching philosophy as translation for grown-ups, and Stanley Cavell as "American philosophy's translator" (72), Saito insightfully and incisively explores anxieties of inclusion,

which are “experienced when we have to live with dissent and are exposed to discordant, disturbing voices” (Saito, Two-Way). Building on Cavell’s reflections on the experience of untranslatability, she argues that contemporary conditions urgently require us to go beyond a politics of inclusion that stops at recognizing and respecting diverse values. Such a politics is too self-centered and monological, she avers, so it leads to educational experiments in low expectations. To get beyond a simplistic cosmopolitanism in our political education, she argues that we require the mutual destabilization and transformation that can arise through the difficult experience of standing on and crossing incommensurable linguistic borders.

We need broad, interdisciplinary political education for bidirectional internationalization, Saito urges, and such a hopeful education requires teachers and students to learn to live with “discordant elements of human lives” by preparing and inhabiting a “space of disequilibrium” (122). The direct experience of linguistic translation can help us to inhabit this space, but she primarily uses translation as a metonymy: “With the processes of self-criticism it so readily instills, translation is a metonym of such transformative experience” (Saito, Two-Way). Translation is a metonym for the way we can open a non-assimilative communicative field, however uneasy or frictional (cf. Medina), that can help to disclose and co-create common ground so that we are more likely to achieve what Isaiah Berlin’s called the “uneasy equilibrium” of democratic discourse (In Gray).

Saito’s project speaks to our urgent need to create intra-cultural, cultural, and subcultural contexts in which we become, in Eddie Glaude’s words, “the kind of people that a democracy requires” (personal communication; see Glaude). Glaude was talking about racial habits and the racial value gap in the United States, but Saito’s more general analysis is pertinent. Consider, for instance, the controverted meaning of “inclusion” at historically white American universities and

liberal arts colleges. Many black and Latinx students, Glaude observes, feel small and insignificant at these institutions and end up not flourishing. This is in part because some students are too often “included” in a one-directional assimilative way, on the *terms* of those holding caste-like positions of social dominance. Saito’s analysis implies that insofar as we fail in our political education to create a mutually unsettling context for bidirectional transformation, we fail *all* of our students.

In my role as a discussant, I now frame some questions and issues in the hope that one or more may elicit further inquiry:

1. Saito argues for “the renewal of language education” that includes an awareness “that different languages open different possibilities of thought, and that all languages have their limitations, such that the exposure to other languages can be enlightening” (124). This is an educational aim that cannot be met by sophisticated translation software. Meanwhile, language education in the United States is increasingly weakened by ongoing program cuts, exposing students to less and less that is dissonant across linguistic borders (136). Given current budgetary constraints, does Saito prescribe this as the most important area for faculty hires and curriculum development?

2. On Garrison’s reading (this volume), Saito’s Cavellian skepticism begins with an inward autonomy that must encounter the Levinasian Other in an asymmetrical relationship. Does Saito hold that such a view is *more* receptive to marginalized voices than the transactive Deweyan view that Garrison advances?

3. Saito emphasizes the receptive aesthetic dimension of Dewey’s philosophy that is not oriented around active problem solving. Her critical remarks are mostly reserved for the dimension of his philosophy that is oriented toward mediating

problematic situations. This latter dimension risks complicity in hegemonic economic calculations. Is there a hint here of Heidegger's critique of overreaching "calculative" philosophies, which he (mistakenly) applied to classical American pragmatism? As evidenced by her timely theme, Saito embraces a philosophic turn that speaks to living, including the struggle to meet widely shared problems. Perhaps Saito could further clarify why she argues that a suitably contextualized conception of inquiry into problems falls short of her anti-foundationalist perfectionism.

4. Saito references Dewey's purported inability to acknowledge the "residual unknown" (104), and she wonders whether Dewey's "robust pragmatist *antiskepticism*" would "be hospitable enough, resourceful enough, to accommodate the anxious voices of those on the margins of society, to hear what has been left unexpressed, and to be open to the unknown?" (72). As Glaude, Shannon Sullivan, and many others have highlighted, Dewey was not in fact resourceful enough, and he certainly did not always personally exemplify his deeply democratic outlook. Nevertheless, Saito's philosophical outlook appears to be akin to Dewey's own in their shared emphasis on democratic processes and social learning. Dewey's work with Jane Addams at Hull House in Chicago in the 1890s underscored for him the ever-growing happiness to be found, he said, "simply in this broadening of intellectual curiosity and sympathy in all the concerns of life" (LW 5:422). Lacking any perfected ideal standpoint, in Dewey's view more can and should be done to democratically minimize the way in which unconsulted and unheard concerns and tensions are illegitimately overlooked, hidden, or relegated as moral externalities. At a conscious philosophical level, he understood that conduct that is *progressive* in one focal dimension of a situation is often simultaneously *regressive* with respect to marginalized

concerns that are off-the-radar of any in-group's idealizations. Perhaps Saito could further clarify what she sees as Dewey's philosophical shortcomings here. Is she revealing roots of Dewey's philosophy that may have stunted the practical development of his deeply democratic outlook?

5. Saito highlights limitations of what Richard Bernstein has called Dewey's "rooted cosmopolitanism" (72). Might one live up to Saito's ideal of an artful translator while nevertheless being a *rootless* cosmopolitan? Speaking as someone who thinks cosmopolitanism must become more *deeply* rooted in nature and culture, I do not think we can count ourselves successful as educators if our students become consummate crossers of unstable border regions at the *price* of rootlessness. Nor does Saito, but this concern about rootlessness presents an opportunity for further clarification: To what extent does Saito see the art of *rooted* bidirectionality as a worthy ideal to perfect?

6. Saito argues in Chapters Four and Five that translation is an *interlinguistic* art as well as an *intralinguistic* one. Vincent Colapietro (this volume) invites us to look beyond prototypical linguistic translation toward what Roman Jakobson conceived as *intersemiotic* translation. Accepting Colapietro's invitation, let me return to Thoreau to thicken my critical concerns about rootlessness. Through his "investiture" as an intersemiotic translator across the human-nature border, Thoreau calls out to those whose own daily lives express a contact-less, asymmetrical relation to nature. Contact with nature was for him the way beyond maladjusted desperation, quiet or otherwise. Aldo Leopold expressed as much in *A Sand County Almanac*, in a timely entry for our March conference:

A March morning is only as drab as he who walks in it without a glance skyward, ear cocked for the geese. I once knew an educated lady, banded by Phi Beta Kappa, who told me that she had never heard or seen the geese that twice a year proclaim the revolving seasons to her well-insulated roof. Is education possibly a process of trading awareness for things of lesser worth? The goose who trades his is soon a pile of feathers. (Leopold)

Dewey was no Leopoldian naturalist, but his rooted sense of our cultural inhabitation of nature carried Thoreau's torch, freed from the 19th century transcendentalist tendency to overly romanticize nature and to echo assumptions of a providential natural order. We exist, and our lives are imbued with meaning, by grace of infinite natural relations that precede us and are affected by us (LW 9:14-18). I do not read Saito as advocating the education of cosmopolitans uprooted from nature. After all, the bidirectional perfectionist translator starts from her home ground, not from a placeless point. But her critique of Dewey's rooted cosmopolitanism could be clarified to explore whether Cavellian an-archic perfectionist education—steeped in “perfection with a strong sense of imperfection” (121-122)—can help students and their teachers relate to the natural world in a more meaningful, value-rich, and ethically appropriate way.

7. What, if any, is the role of empathy within Cavell's and Saito's perfectionist striving? Based on Saito's descriptions, it seems that the best translations rely on empathetic imagination. Likewise, the art of teaching as translation appears to involve great empathy. For example, in the current lingo, teachers must imaginatively take up the standpoint of novices who lack the competence to be aware of their relative incompetence.

8. In his reading of Saito and Thoreau, Colapietro (this volume) agrees that the anxieties of inclusion are real and pressing, but he suggests that it is *investiture*—avoiding the “inner death” of an unlived life (within an infrastructure of unsustainable and hollowing consumption)—that is the “controlling question of the perfectionist project.” What might be noticed, or missed, by entertaining with Colapietro that the issue of how to invest our lives, rather than the anxieties of inclusion, should be at the heart of Saito’s call for bidirectional transformation?

9. In his reading of Saito and Dewey, Garrison (this volume) highlights Saito’s assertion that Dewey’s philosophy is inadequate to “being affected by what is beyond our grasp” (72). Garrison points to “Qualitative Thought,” an essay Saito references (33). Dewey wrote: “The gist of the matter is that the immediate existence of quality, and of dominant and pervasive quality, is the background, the point of departure, and the regulative principle of all thinking” (LW 5:262). Dewey elaborated the felt horizon of experience as a pervasive, “underlying qualitative character that constitutes a situation.” All meaning, whether linguistic or affective, is dependent upon this qualitative field, which suffuses and differentiates experience (LW 5:248). Does reading Dewey primarily through this affective prism, as Garrison prescribes, imply any reframing of Saito’s critique?

10. On a closely related note, it is sometimes said, quite rightly, that art is ineffable. Hence, *as* an art, the meaning of a translation exceeds what can be expressed through language. But from Dewey’s standpoint, this is not because the art of translation outstrips thought. Thought is itself qualitatively nuanced. Thought requires “language, the tool of tools,” but thought is not identical to or reducible to language (LW 1:134; see

LW 1:132–61). Dewey was not suddenly, despite his professed naturalism, positing some gaseous extralinguistic “thought” here. His view was thoroughly naturalistic, as he clarified in “Qualitative Thought”: “Language fails not because thought fails, but because no verbal symbols can do justice to the fullness and richness of thought” (LW 5:250). What are implications, for philosophy as translation, of Dewey’s contention that thought is more qualitatively nuanced than language?

11. Finally, looking beyond translation as a metonymy, is direct experience of inter- and intra-linguistic translation *necessary* for bidirectional internationalization? Is it on its own *sufficient*? In other words, what Saito calls “the very moment of crossing borders” is a vital experience for weaving an intra-cultural identity, but is it moreover “*necessary* to learn to live” in this way (75, my emphasis)? Arguably, what is minimally necessary for furthering cross-cultural understanding, Kwame Anthony Appiah has argued in tandem with dual-process psychologists like Daniel Kahneman and Jonathan Haidt, is something noncognitive, namely for people to get *used to* each other so that their driving intuitions change (Appiah 2010; Haidt 2012). Take early objectors to same-sex unions in the United States. Many soon *got over* this, but most of them were not opening themselves anxiously to the untranslatable. They just got used to a new normal. Their habituated intuitions changed along with the new baseline. A deeper Saito-esque transformational encounter would presumably be far more durable, and would be a resource for dealing with the anxieties of inclusion in other life situations. These are vital aims of education, and Saito’s book is the best argument I have yet encountered for teaching the art of translation across the curriculum. Nevertheless, even as we struggle to open more educational opportunities for mutually transformative translation, we can still

contribute to a wider cultural context in which people get used to each other in ways that advance understanding across borders of identity.

References

Citations of John Dewey's works are to the thirty-seven-volume critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press under the editorship of Jo Ann Boydston. In-text citations give the original publication date and series abbreviation, followed by volume number and page number. For example, (1934, LW 10:12) is page 12 of *Art as Experience*, which was published as volume 10 of *The Later Works*.

Series abbreviations for *The Collected Works*:

EW *The Early Works* (1882–1898)

MW *The Middle Works* (1899–1924)

LW *The Later Works* (1925–1953)

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