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## **Pierce-ing the Veil: On the Usefulness of Comparing American Pragmatism and Buddhism**

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# Peirce-ing the Veil: On the Usefulness of Comparing American Pragmatism and Buddhism

by

**Patrick Ray Monroe**

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Diploma to

The Honors College

of

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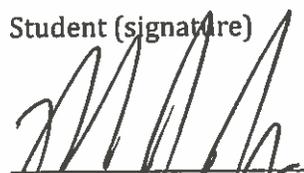
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## **Abstract**

*Philosophy from a number of pragmatist thinkers—notably Charles S. Peirce—on the interaction between world and individual parallels Buddhist doctrines. Comparison of these two systems allows for deeper understanding of both. Through interaction with the work of current comparative philosophers as well as analysis of the work of Charles S. Peirce I display the kinship of pragmatism and Buddhism. It is my hope that these comparisons will strength cultural exchange between the East and the West.*

## Introduction

Western philosophy has a long history of discrediting or outright ignoring perspectives from other parts of the world. Hegel famously disregarded the philosophical works of China and India as being “outside the World’s History.”<sup>1</sup> Philosophy courses of innumerable colleges and universities embrace roughly the same canon: Aristotle, Plato, Descartes, Kant, Hume and many other European thinkers are given primary focus. Where consideration of non-European ideas is even made available, it is done so through specialized courses (Asian Philosophy, for instance) that may only be offered rarely. As frustrating as this seeming close-mindedness is, all is not lost. It seems that Western philosophy is growing more and more willing to broaden its horizons as time goes on.

The end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> has seen the field of comparative philosophy grow by leaps and bounds. Its goal is simple, but complex: to provide a deeper appreciation for non-European ideas (primarily from Asian thinkers) by drawing parallels between these ideas and counterparts in the West. The goal is not to legitimize Western notions with Eastern ideals; rather, comparative philosophers seek to show that as interesting and noteworthy as Western concepts may be, they are occasionally—if not frequently—formulated by an Eastern counterpart during a similar timespan or hundreds of years prior. One area of comparative philosophy that receives a fair amount of time and focus is the comparison between American pragmatism and Buddhism. While work has been done to connect both William James<sup>2</sup> and John Dewey<sup>3</sup> to schools of Buddhism, I believe the field can be further expanded to the work of Charles

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<sup>1</sup> Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. *The Philosophy of History*, 133.

<sup>2</sup> Miranda Shaw, "William James and Yogācāra Philosophy: A Comparative Inquiry."

<sup>3</sup> Gregory M. Fahy, "Huayan Buddhism and Dewey: Emptiness, Compassion and the Philosophical Fallacy."

Sanders Peirce, often heralded as the father of pragmatism. Connecting Peirce to Buddhism brings the last of the “big three” early pragmatists into the fold and deepens the connection between Buddhism and pragmatism.

To what extent is a comparison between American pragmatism and Buddhism useful? What objections are there to these comparisons and on what grounds are they raised? Ultimately, where does the comparison between pragmatism and Buddhism leave practitioners of both schools? I hope to answer these questions in this paper and display the skillful means by which comparison may pave the road to greater understanding.

## Main Argument and Thesis

I will maintain in this paper that philosophy from a number of pragmatist thinkers—notably Charles S. Peirce—on the interaction between world and individual parallels Buddhist doctrines. Comparison of these two systems allows for deeper understanding of both. I provide the following argument for my thesis:

1. The metaphysical similarities between American pragmatism and schools of Buddhist thought are profound.
2. Either these similarities are coincidental with no deeper meaning or these similarities indicate a shared metaphysical basis that, when studied, deepens understanding of both schools of thought.
3. The similarities between American pragmatism and Buddhism are too myriad and too deep to dismiss as meaningless coincidence.
4. Therefore, similarities between American pragmatism and Buddhism indicate a shared metaphysical basis that, when studied, deepens understanding of both schools of thought.

The sharing of a metaphysical basis refers to the notion that both pragmatism and Buddhism share perspectives on the world that guide the thoughts of both schools along similar paths and towards similar ends. This does not mean that Buddhism is identical to pragmatism nor pragmatism to Buddhism, nor is it an attempt to legitimize Buddhism's induction to the Western canon by comparison. Rather, this argument and the comparisons that compose it display that both Buddhism and pragmatism can learn a great deal from each other while maintaining their individual identities.

Given this thesis and its supporting argument, I will begin by considering Michael Morreau's objection to my first premise. Morreau is critical of the act of comparison, holding that comparison of any two differing ideas accomplishes nothing and should be avoided.

## Objection 1 – Problem with Comparison

In Michael Morreau’s paper “It Simply Does Not Add Up: Trouble With Overall Similarity”, he deals with the topic of comparison between two philosophical ideas. Morreau holds that comparison between two ideas does not accomplish the work that many demand of it, a stance that strikes directly at the first premise of my main argument. As the author himself puts it, “Overall similarity is supposed to be an aggregate of similarities and differences in various respects. But there is no good way of combining them all.”<sup>4</sup> Condensing some of Morreau’s work provides us with the following argument:

1. Similarity is relative and comparative.
2. If similarities cannot overcome differences then comparison does not do the work philosophy asks of it and leads to no useful conclusions on a subject.
3. Greater similarity in one respect does not make up for less similarity in another respect.
4. Therefore, there can be no combining of the various similarities and differences of things into useful comparisons of any level of similarity.

Morreau’s conclusion refutes my third premise. My entire argument hinges on combining, comparing and relating similarities between different ideologies; without comparison my paper—as well as the entirety of comparative philosophy—flounders and dies. Fortunately, Morreau’s criticism is not insurmountable. I will consider a weakness in the construction of his argument and pose a counterargument of my own in order to ensure the continuance of my discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Morreau. 2010. "It Simply Does Not Add Up: Trouble With Overall Similarity."

## **Reply 1 – Counterargument**

I object to the third premise of the above argument. Comparison of two (or more) systems of thought is done to highlight the differences as well as the similarities. Without differences (situations of less similarity) comparison is ultimately meaningless and yields no deeper understanding of either system. Rendered as an argument:

1. Meaningful comparison between two systems of thought can only be conducted when there are both similarities and differences between the two systems.
2. There are large differences between Buddhism and American pragmatism.
3. There are large similarities between Buddhism and American pragmatism.
4. Therefore, meaningful comparisons of similarity between Buddhism and American pragmatism can be conducted.

## Objection 2 – Richard Rorty

As hopeful as my thesis portrays the comparison of pragmatism and Buddhism, it is not immune to criticism. Ironically enough, one of the strongest criticisms of comparative philosophy I could find comes from one of contemporary pragmatism's elite, Richard Rorty.

As reported by John Holder:

... [Rorty] said that he had tried to read Confucius, but despite his best efforts, Confucian doctrines remained opaque to him... Rorty said that he cannot relate discussions of Confucian thought to his own inquiries without doing an injustice to the Asian traditions under study. He went on to generalize his experience by saying that this is likely to be true of all cross-cultural comparisons—that every philosopher is so deeply grounded in her or his cultural context that there is little hope of having a fruitful philosophical dialogue across incommensurable cultural contexts... by suggesting that Western philosophers should talk only with other Western philosophers...<sup>5</sup>

Despite Rorty's focus on the works of Confucius, the principle he employs remains the same and runs entirely counter to my thesis: Western philosophy should talk to itself, Eastern philosophy should do the same and incommensurability maintains this divide. Rendering Rorty's comments into a more standard form provides us with the following argument:

1. Two systems of thought are incommensurable when cultural context prevents meaningful discussion between members of said systems.
2. If two systems of thought are incommensurable, members of each system should converse only with those they share a background with.

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<sup>5</sup> John Holder. "The Purpose and Perils of Comparative Philosophy." (40)

3. Western thought and Eastern thought are incommensurable.
4. Therefore, Western philosophers should talk only to other Western philosophers and Eastern philosophers should only converse with Eastern philosophers.

Though Rorty's argument primarily strikes against my thesis it is also damaging to my first premise. The entire crux of my argument relies on the existence of metaphysical similarity between Pragmatism, a western school of thought, and Buddhism, an Eastern one. Rorty's argument denies any possibility for similarity between Pragmatism and Buddhism due to the different cultural contexts held by practitioners of each school.

Rorty's criticism of incommensurability of systems of thought was well known and leveled even against his intellectual inspiration, John Dewey.<sup>6</sup> As such, it's unsurprising to find a similar, if more strongly put argument in this context. Though it seems damning at first glance, I aim to show that the case against comparative philosophy is not as bleak as he makes it seem.

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<sup>6</sup> Rorty, Richard. *Rorty & Pragmatism: The Philosopher Responds to His Critics*.

## Response 2: Peirce Comparison

I object to Rorty's third premise, namely that Western and Eastern thought are incommensurable. As presented in the first thesis of his argument, two systems of thought are incommensurable when the cultural context of said systems prevents meaningful discussion between their members. I will display that such a statement in no way applies to the case of American pragmatism and Buddhism.

Gregory Fahy's comparison of James Dewey and Huayan Buddhism reveals a shared metaphysical basis focused on interrelatedness.<sup>7</sup> Miranda Shaw delves deeply into the work of William James as compared to Yogācāra Buddhism.<sup>8</sup> For the purposes of my response, I will show that the material used by Shaw in her connection of James to Yogācāra will work just as well for Peirce. Extending this comparison to the last of the "big three" of early pragmatists widens the base further and provides innumerable points for discussion between pragmatism and Buddhism.

In "Some Consequences of the Four Incapacities", Peirce talks at length about reality and how the concept of reality, "essentially involves the notion of a COMMUNITY, without define limits..."<sup>9</sup> Building from the importance of community in the construction and accrual of knowledge, Peirce considers the nature of individual consciousness and makes a powerful statement:

"Without fatiguing the reader by stretching out the parallelism too far, it is sufficient to say that there is no element whatever of man's consciousness which has not something corresponding to it in the word; and the reason is obvious. It is that the

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<sup>7</sup> Fahy, "Huayan Buddhism and Dewey"

<sup>8</sup> Shaw, "William James and Yogācāra."

<sup>9</sup> Peirce, Charles S. "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities."

word or sign which a man uses is the man himself. For, as the fact that life is a train of thought, proves that man is a sign; so, that every thought is an *external* sign, proves that man is an external sign... Thus, my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought.”<sup>10</sup>

So, Peirce sees knowledge and its means of construction as being driven by community; further, the tool of language itself is intrinsic to a person’s being, extending the person beyond themselves *into* the world. The act of being itself is bound-up in what lies external to the member of a community.

Practitioners of Buddhism in general will already be nodding their heads at the familiar phrasing of this notion, one that sounds remarkably similar to the doctrine of dependent origination or *pratītyasamutpāda*. This doctrine holds that while I am engaging with the world, the world itself is acting upon me. Thus, my continued existence as it stands is owed to the world around me. I—and I use the individual pronoun loosely, remembering Buddhist ideas of rejection of self—owe my existence to the world in much the same way that Peirce acknowledges the role of the community in a person’s ability to know.

*First Section:* Primacy of experience between Peirce and Yogācāra’s abhutaparikalpa. Highlight the ways in which Peirce views experience, namely as the main way we interact with the world. Highlight how we cannot separate experience from our ways of slicing up the world.

*Second Section:* External world. Compare Yogācāra’s conception of ‘nothingness’—especially quote concerning “in order for something to be empty it must first exist”—with

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<sup>10</sup> ibid

Peirce's ideal end of enquiry to show that Peirce and Yogācāra do acknowledge an external world.

*Third Section:* The usefulness of pragmatism and *arthakriyā*. Talk about Peirce's pragmatic maxim and Buddhism's desire to end suffering.

In the previous sections I have outlined the relationship between C.S. Peirce and Yogācāra Buddhism as a response to Richard Rorty's criticism of comparative philosophy. These comparisons have made use of source material from Peirce and Yogācāra Buddhism, touching base with the core of both bodies of thought to ensure an authentic representation of their voice. Further, these comparisons have shown that while the cultural contexts of Yogācāra Buddhism and Peirce's pragmatism are distinct they are by no means insurmountable nor incommensurable. There are real grounds for dialogue between Peirce and Buddhism, with comparisons of the two providing a deeper understanding of their similarities, differences, strengths and weaknesses in thought.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have responded to Michael Morreau's criticism of comparison between two philosophical ideas. I displayed the weakness of Morreau's argument and how the work of comparative philosophy can provide real benefits to the field of philosophy. Additionally, I have responded to Richard Rorty's criticism of comparative philosophy by considering the relationship between Charles S. Peirce and Yogācāra Buddhism. I did this by drawing on a number of Peirce's works, ultimately displaying the shared metaphysical between pragmatism and Buddhism. This comparison is made even more impressive thanks to the separation of pragmatism and Buddhism by time and cultural context. But where does this comparison leave us? What has been accomplished by reaching across more than a thousand years of history to connect pragmatism and Buddhism?

Pragmatism is lauded for its inventive approach to philosophical problems. Focus on communal construction of the world, openness to different ideas and the placing of value on "what works" are all considered inventive notions that seem to pay real dividends. However, the resources utilized in this paper have shown that Buddhism has held these ideas for more than a thousand years. Had Western philosophers been more open to cross-cultural exchange, the use of these concepts and the dialogues that result from them might have been available many, many years ago.

Philosophical ideas work best when they have other ideas to talk to. Though an idea may be cultivated and grown in a vacuum, the true test of its mettle is its interaction with differing—and at times dissenting—opinions. The way forward for Western philosophy lies in the acknowledgement, appreciation and study of modes of thought different from our own.

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