Relational philosophies developed in classical American pragmatism and the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy suggest aims for greater ecological responsiveness in moral education. To better guide education, we need to know how ecological perception becomes relevant to our deliberations. Our deliberations enlist imagination of a specifically ecological sort when the imaginative structures we use to understand ecosystemic relationships shape our mental simulations and rehearsals. Enriched through cross-cultural dialogue, a finely aware ecological imagination can make the deliberations of the coming generation more trustworthy.

Moral education for the 21st century must better enable youths to intelligently negotiate complex systems, from economic systems to ecosystems, in private choices and public policies. Educational institutions must do a better job helping youths to see beyond simple relations of consumers to commodities if we are to respond to a global economic milieu in which affluence sanctifies the innocence of consumers – an innocence purchased by ignorance of the social, environmental, and inter-species hazards posed by our “business as usual” behaviors. Contemporary moral perception requires supplementation and expansion beyond the speck of self-interest around which most daily consumer concerns orbit.

In order to clarify and develop aims for moral education that are relevant to the global effects of our choices and policies, we need sustained, cross-cultural philosophical dialogue that taps intellectual resources for reinvesting our social and natural interconnections while avoiding moralistic or authoritarian instruction that chokes growth. East Asian and American philosophical traditions, despite the paucity of environmental virtues in the current majority cultures of either, can help us to better perceive the relational networks in which our finite lives are embedded. In the first section of this paper I explore relational thinking in classical American pragmatism and the Kyoto School of modern Japanese philosophy to help develop, in the second section, a concept of “ecological imagination.” In the final section I draw from the
foregoing to clarify appropriate aims for contemporary moral education if it is to contribute to greater ecological responsiveness.

1. Relational Imagination, East and West

Acknowledging upfront that comparative projects can tend toward “self-centered, monological, and appropriative modes of ... historical thinking,” it will nonetheless be helpful to identify several general affinities between the relational thinking of American pragmatism and many East Asian traditions, inasmuch as these affinities suggest aims for ecologically responsible moral education. To keep the scope manageable, I draw primarily on ecological wisdom distilled from the Kyoto School.

Kyoto University is where modern Japanese philosophy began with Nishida Kitarō’s (1870–1945) work reconstructing the tools and concepts of western philosophy, such as the idea of pre-conceptual pure experience in James, to contribute an eastern standpoint to western philosophy. Nishida built the philosophy department at Kyoto University, secured an appointment for Tanabe Hajime, launched the career of Watsuji Tetsurō, and attracted Nishitani Keiji among other students, continuing what became known as the Kyoto School (Kyōto-gaku-ha) tradition.

The Kyoto School philosophers were among the first to bring a distinctively East Asian perspective to enlarging and challenging the philosophical tradition that began in ancient Greece. They are part of an ongoing global philosophical dialogue that extends – or should extend – well beyond the confines of Asian Studies or Japanese Studies. “When I say ‘philosophy,’ Nishitani wrote, “I first of all mean Western philosophy, since this is the most influential one. ... To think [the Buddhist] standpoint by way of philosophy is my basic concern.”

A. The American pragmatist tradition joins many East Asian traditions in avoiding fallacies of reification that privilege agents over situations, static forms over processes, the substantive over the transitive – what James dubbed the “psychologist’s fallacy,” Dewey recognized as “the philosophical fallacy” (LW 1: 27–29), and Whitehead labeled the fallacy of “misplaced concreteness.” The words “frog” and “pond” signify not only objects one can point to at simple locations, but also “an organized integration of complex relationships, activities, and events which incorporate a whole transactional field.” Whitehead’s fallacy of “simple location” highlights our tendency to forget this horizontal field that is incorporated into focal objects.

Individuals co-constitute their horizontal field. Social and natural relationships are popularly conceived as discovered, found, given. James and Dewey recognized that we create relationships as well as find them, and we thereby change reality. We do not create from outside or above. Instead, our relational constructions are possibilities of situations that we actualize through interactions – most clearly through the arts, our source of renewal and redirection.