BOOK REVIEW

Evolving Postwar Japanese Philosophy: Odyssey Towards a Contemporary Cosmology through the Human Body, Technology, and Ecology

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The literature on postwar Japanese philosophy in English is very scarce. Many of the most relevant postwar Japanese philosophers, with the exception of Karatani Kōjin, remain largely untranslated into European languages. Matsui Nobuyuki's latest book offers not only a scholarly approach to some crucial philosophical problems of postwar philosophy, but also a critical investigation of what the postwar period meant and an attempt to highlight its relevance for understanding today's post-industrial societies.

World War II and the defeat of Japan were historical events of not only political and social importance, but also of intellectual and cultural importance. Postwar philosophy defined itself in opposition to wartime philosophy, especially in contrast to the philosophers of the Kyoto School. This constellation of philosophers, which included Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, Miki Kiyoshi, and Kōsaka Masaaki, represented for postwar philosophers the failure of reason in the face of sentimentalist patriotism. Indeed, many of the philosophers of the Kyoto School tried to interpret philosophically the historical moment in which they lived. This was often expressed in defense of Japan's leadership as the guide of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Of course, this heroic voluntarism was shattered with the Allied victory as a result of the horrendous attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Matsui's book investigates the echoes of the tension between prewar and postwar in the form of different aspects; the main one being the tension between *pathos* and *logos*. According to Nishida's disciple, Miki Kiyoshi, who had also been an intellectual and political personality of great importance during the 1930s and 1940s, human existence is characterized by the dialectical struggle between *pathos* and *logos*, between embodied subjectivity and the objectivity of reason. The "rift" — as Matsui (7) calls it — between *pathos* and *logos* is the conceptual mark of the historical tension between wartime and postwar philosophy. Even if it deals mainly with authors of the postwar period, the specters of the Kyoto School are still present throughout the book.

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The book is divided into four chapters. The first one is focused on exploring the tension between *pathos* and *logos* in the realm of literary thought, especially in the figure of Katō Shūichi. Katō was aware of the limits of sensibility in expressing the unspeakable nature of death and the horror of death. It was a time to *reflect* on the atrocities of the war, not to anesthetize them. However, Katō also understood the importance of sensibility and his harsh criticism of the work of Mishima Yukio can be read in this sense. According to Katō, Mishima felt he was a continuator of the legacy of the Japanese Romantic School, led in no small measure by the figure of Yasuda Yojūrō. However, according to Katō, Mishima was a "restorationist, without a past to restore" (55). Added to this was the fact that Mishima's idealization of death diminished his creative force (56). As Matsui explains, this is not merely a criticism of Mishima's irrationalism. On the contrary, given that "our language is always intertwined with trans-linguistic intangibility" (58), the problem seems to be rather that for Mishima, this language of the unattainable is reduced to a monologue that rejects all dialogic instances. Thus, Matsui suggests that Katō is not merely an enlightened critic of militarist *pathos*; on the contrary, Katō appears characterized by his quest for *universality* through translinguistic sensibility (59). Katō's notion of "subtle language," which is borrowed from Earl Wasserman and Charles Taylor, is then, according to Matsui, an open language, a language that does not abandon the communicative urge, without becoming declarative in the romantic mode, but recognizing its own limits. However, there are also limits to Katō's thought. Matsui explores these limits using the reflections of another literary critic, Katō Norihito. It seems that the problem lies here: while Katō Shūichi saw Mishima as a "restorationist without a past," Katō Norihito recognized that in fact there was a past, but it is impossible to connect with it. Mishima was not merely delusional; rather Mishima tried to move between both eras. In a sense, he was an inhabitant of different synchronicities. For Matsui, it seems that Katō Shūichi's "universalism-through-sensibility" did not recognize the true nature of the discontinuity. In other words, the subtle language "cannot and should not fully recover the continuity between the prewar and postwar periods" (69). Recognizing this discontinuity is, according to Matsui, accepting the contingency of continuity.

The question of contingency is continued in the next chapter, in the context of Nakamura Yūjirō's philosophy of institutions. If we understand contingency as "it is possible that [something] is so and not so (at the same time)" (68), then tensions or contradictions can be assumed to be forms of contingency. The tension between the self and the institution is one of these contingencies (see 91). Institutions are objectifications, that is, limitations of some kind. Normally, they are thought of as rigid structures, which expel and normalize the contingent. The law is an institution, and to exist it requires the limitation of the freedom of the individual. But Nakamura tries to avoid the incompatibility between institutions and freedom by recurring to the concept of "place" (場所). This concept belongs to the philosophical terminology of Nishida Kitarō but is used by Nakamura in the context of institutional relations. Instead of reducing the formation of an institution to some mechanistic causality, the idea of a polycentric place enables us to think of multicausality, not grounded in energetic causation (97-98). Here, Matsui makes reference to the controversial theories of Rupert Sheldrake and to some ideas of David Bohm. Since Sheldrake's ideas are essential to understanding Matsui's reconstruction of Nakamura, I will say more about this when dealing with Chapter 4.

In any case, the non-linearity contained in the idea of "place" undermines the idea of "institutions vs individual," but also some kind of "mutualism." The whole point of this chapter is to show that it is possible to think about institutions as closed systems beyond the "internal-external" framework.

Even if Chapter 3 does not mention institutions, it could be seen as a further reflection on

the role of institutions in the digital age. Here, Matsui compares Nakamura's theory of common sense with Karatani's structure of world history. The capital-digital-state generates a new type of institution that mediates the relation between state and capital, under the form of plunder, appropriation, and commercialization of data. The non-linearity of the previous chapter appears here serving a new form of alienation, based on the digitalization of imagination. For that reason, Matsui argues that it is necessary to re-introduce the "physical integrity of senses" (147). Here, it seems to me that Matsui attempts this by interpreting the concept of "place" as the intersection between embodiment and ecology, as the field of creative co-generation. In doing so, he wants to demonstrate that — contrary to Karatani's critique — Nakamura is not a completely "a-historical" or "a-political" philosopher, since his notion of common sense offers a kind of political response to the challenges of social life.

The fourth and closing chapter is perhaps the most challenging one. Here, Matsui synthesizes information from different sources, including Kūkai's tantrism and Yuk Hui's discussion about cybernetics. There is a conceptual development in Nakamura that goes from the notion of "common sense" to the notion of "rhythmic oscillation" (inspired by Sheldrake). Hence, the goal of this last chapter is to use Nakamura's late philosophy in order to formulate a non-substantialist ontology based on rhythmic oscillation. Expanding on Nishida's theory of the "place of absolute nothingness," Nakamura proposes an ontology of multiple "places" oscillating and resonating among themselves. The ground of existence, the physical world, the symbolic world, and the logical world, none of them seem to have any fundamental priority. On the contrary, their communication is based on a sort of contingency that enables a "system of infinitely possible recombination" (183).

Nakamura's concept of rhythmic oscillation might sound mysterious to the reader if one does not know about Sheldrake's speculative theory of morphic resonance. In an article from 1994, Sheldrake explained his theory as follows:

> In essence, I suggest that each kind of self-organizing system, be it a crystal, an atom, a molecule, a cell, an organism, or a society, has its own organizing field which makes the whole more than the sum of the parts. I call it the morphic field — the field which gives it its form or shape, from the Greek word morphé for form. The morphic fields governing these systems are what convey the habits of the system. For example, each baby giraffe embryo, as it grows is shaped by an invisible morphogenetic or morphic field of the giraffe and that field takes its form, not from some kind of Platonic archetype, or some kind of eternal mathematical equation that was there at the time of or before the big bang, but rather from the actual forms of previous giraffes. It tunes in, as it were, to all previous giraffes by a process I call morphic resonance — the influence of like upon like through or across space and time from the past. Each giraffe is then shaped by the morphic field, which contains a kind of collective memory of the species. Each individual draws upon this collective memory and, in turn, contributes to it. (Sheldrake 1994, 53)

Instead of a hierarchical ontology based on eternal archetypes or deterministic natural laws, Sheldrake's self-poietic worldview proposes a universe constituted by different — "resonating"— fields. It is easy to see that this idea fascinated Nakamura, who saw in it its compatibility with Nishida's "place."

With this "overlap" between contingency and nothingness (209), Matsui brings the different reflections of his book to a conclusion. In fact, the dispute between Katō Shūichi and Katō Norihiro or Karatani and Nakamura could be summarized as a problem about the role of contingency, the discontinuity between *pathos* and *logos*. It is also not surprising that contingency occupies such

an important place in post-war Japanese philosophy. It could be said that after the *nothingness* of the Second War, what remained was a sense of *contingency* and chaos. This will be the ground for postmodernism and the further development of Japanese thought in figures such as Asada Akira and Azuma Hiroki.

Matsui's concluding remarks about contingency as the principle that enables but also destabilizes communication (209) should be taken seriously. Against the *world of worlds* (世界的世界) envisaged by Nishida Kitarō, in which each nation moves dialectically toward its own self-realization, our postmodern world is a world of dissonances in which the nation has become a mysterious (im)possibility (as in Karatani's mode of exchange X). Matsui is not alone in thinking that contingency represents some kind of creative hope. Azuma Hiroki, a successor of Karatani in a certain sense, in the age of post-grand-narratives, advocated reembracing the potentiality of (mis) communicating with strangers. The Japanese critic writes in a recent book:

> It seems to me that this tactic of misdelivery is the necessary condition that must be put in place as the basis of all realistic and sustainable resistance in this age of bifurcation between nation state and Empire. In the twenty-first-century order, rhizomic mobilization without misdelivery can only resemble the biopower of Empire. (Azuma 2023, 140)

But to what extent can we compare both projects? In his book, *Philosophy of the Tourist*, published in Japanese in 2017, Azuma uses the word "rewiring" borrowed from network theory to express the ability of nodes to be connected more or less randomly with other nodes at varying distances. This idea is reminiscent of the idea of rhythmic oscillation. But is it the same thing? It is clear that in the digital era, the promise of unexpected communications with distant strangers as the basis of new social relationships is tempting. But it seems that Matsui — via Nakamura — is attempting something else, not only formal and technical resonance, but also a physical and sensorial resonance through the body. Rewiring is only possible where there is a previous structure. For Matsui, this structure seems not to be necessary, as multiple autopoietic "somaesthetic" structures are possible. Matsui's brilliant and incisive work invites us to further investigate this idea and revisit the inexhaustible material of Japanese philosophy.

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