

OPENING REMARK

AGAINST THE GRAIN OF *REDUCTIO AD JAPONICUM*

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To say something proper and appropriate in celebration of the birth and successful launch of the *Journal of Japanese Philosophy*, it is perhaps pertinent to begin with an apology because in Japan the apology is one of the most popular modes of *exordium*. Where the British or the Americans might crack a joke or two to begin with, the Japanese make an apology just as a way of warming up. It goes without saying that apologies of this kind are neither serious nor sincere.

But on this present occasion my apology is both serious and sincere. For an occasion such as this demands that the opening remarks be delivered by some authority in the field concerned. But the unhappy truth is that I am neither a philosopher nor an authority in any field. For this my apologies. Having said that, however, this does not mean that my accepting the kindly invitation of Professors Ishii Tsuyoshi and Kevin Lam was entirely unmotivated. Friendship with them, of course, was one of the major factors that gave me confidence to accept; but at the same time there was another factor in my mind that persuaded me to assume this undeserved role.

And this other factor is a concern with the sorry predicament in which the Japanese, and particularly Japanese academics, have found themselves placed for some time under the seemingly irresistible influence of globalization. This predicament, which in fact is a topic often talked about these days, has two aspects: (1) pressure from the outside world to get attuned to globalizing developments on the one hand and (2) a deep-rooted domestic predilection for introversion, on the other. The latter element (the predilection for introversion) is often problematized these days as a particular instance of “introverted youth” (or “*otaku*”) but even a brief look at Japanese history will tell us that it is not simply a recent development but something of a deep-grained cultural and traditional nature. And I believe it

may well be one of the major tasks of Japanese philosophy to address this deep-rooted cultural and traditional problematic, because it is surely part of the essential business of philosophy to set one free from the contingent horizons of the given world in which one is culturally embedded. If there is any academic discipline that is capable of diagnosing the Japanese malaise of cultural introversion and offering some proper treatment, it is Japanese philosophy.

Now, to see in this connection the history of Japan in terms of its predilection for introversion, alias isolationism, is (I think) revealing. There are in fact two major periods of self-imposed isolation in Japanese history, the first from 894 to c. 1200, lasting about three hundred years, the second from 1635 to 1868, lasting about two hundred and fifty years. If we set the beginnings of the national establishment of a sort around the fifth century AD., 550 years out of 1,500 years, that is, no less than 37 percent of our entire national history, as it turns out, was spent in the isolationist mode. To quote from Kato Shuichi,

Between the first seclusion of three hundred years and the second one of two hundred and fifty years (Tokugawa Era), Japan saw a certain period of relative openness, with the visits of Zen monks from China and the activities of Jesuit missionaries from the Iberian Peninsula. There developed in this period the practices of commerce with Ming-dynasty China (conducted by the Muromachi government) and with the Korean Peninsula (conducted by Tsushima Island); there were also wide-ranging commercial transactions, legal and illegal, with not only Okinawa but also South-East Asia. In Siam [present Thailand] there are said to have been Japanese villages, and the famous Japanese pirates called "*wako*" pillaged the coasts of China and Korea. But domestically Japan in the period from the end of the 14th century to the beginning of the 16th century found itself in a process not of concentration of power but of its diffusion. ... The culture of the first seclusion, although its general characteristics of refinement in sensitivity and behaviour were to some extent influenced and modified by the openness of the age, was not fundamentally

wiped away but remained as such and was even to be reinforced by the second period of seclusion.¹

The culture and mentality of isolationism is distinguished by its overriding motive of self-interest and its exclusive concern with internal law and order. The occasion that gave rise to the first period of isolationism is often ascribed to the critical view Sugawara-no Michizane (845–903) took toward the Mission to Tang-dynasty China. In 894 when he was elected to the Mission, which had started in 630, Michizane insisted on the Mission's cessation not only because of the decline of the Tang dynasty and the high risk and expenditure incidental to it but also on the grounds that Japan had learnt from the Tang dynasty what it could and should have done. In other words, Japan would condescend to open itself if and only if there was something worth learning from outside; otherwise, it would duly close its doors and coop itself up.

If the first period of isolationism was initiated by Sugawara-no Michizane's self-interested recognition that there was nothing more to learn from China, the second was brought in by the conservative and introverted political belief shared by two great politicians, Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536/7–1598) and Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616), that domestic order should come first and be secured even at the expense of international relations. We must not forget, however, that this decision was made during what is world-historically famed as "the Age of Discovery" and, seen in that perspective, international relations were the last thing that Japan should have ignored.

The history of Japan seen from the perspective of isolationism is thus indicative of its characteristic self-centeredness and self-interestedness. This rather dark picture of Japan may run counter to the brighter one of Japan as a unique and wholesale receptacle or melting pot, if you like, of different cultures. It is often said that Japan has been an excellent learner from abroad, openly accepting many things of different cultural origins, while at the same time it has almost always modified everything imported to its own taste, leaving nothing intact. There is a sense in which what it has voraciously absorbed in the periods of relative openness, it digests in the periods of seclusion to create a refined product of its own. But we must not overlook the fact that this brighter picture of Japan and that darker picture of self-centeredness and self-interestedness, in fact, both share the same reductionist structure. In other words, the

final point of reference is always already Japan or things Japanese, according to which everything existing outside is to be regarded as a means to some domestic and nativist end.

I call this indigenous reductive tendency “*reductio ad japonicum*” on the analogy, if ironical, of the *reductio ad absurdum*. While the *reductio ad absurdum* is “a method that proves the falsity of a premise by showing that its logical consequence is absurd or contradictory” (*OED*), the *reductio ad japonicum* is an unmethodical cultural disposition of the introvert kind that reduces everything useful in the outer world to some useful internal end.

To illustrate this point very briefly, let me take, for instance, the case of our studies of English Literature in the University of Tokyo. The department of English Literature was authorized a decade after the establishment of the Imperial University of Tokyo in 1886. Since its founding fathers, such as Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), were foreign instructors, it was natural that the classes were conducted all in English. But when Hearn retired in 1903 and was replaced by Natsume Soseki (1867–1916), real modernization set in. From then on, what mattered was the study of English Literature as a means to a Japanese end, that is to say, for the Japanese and by the Japanese. Since then, with a few minor exceptions, the study of English Literature throughout Japan has been pursued within the Japanese language. Even in this day and age of globalization, the practice is by and large observed, not only in universities but also in academic societies related to the discipline. In other words, the scholarship of English Literature in Japan, by and large, has little intention to form an international and intercultural platform for research, investigation, and collaboration.

What is really at stake in globalization is this will and aspiration to create an international and intercultural platform—a will and aspiration that require for their manifestation and actualization an ideological apparatus of transcendental and universalistic orientations that empowers one to see beyond the cultural cave in which we can become blindly entrapped. I don’t have to remind you that such an ideological apparatus has received the rather crude nomenclature of “the Axial”—that is, the special type of mindset that is thought to have been born in the great epoch of religious revolutions during the first millennium BCE. As a kind of mental advance in human evolution, it is characterized by its drive toward transcendental and universalistic orientations. The jargon of “the Axial,” as

you know, was first invented by Karl Jaspers in his *Von Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1945) but it has recently been much in use again thanks to its frequent use and reference by such influential scholars as the late Robert Bellah, Hans Jonas, A. N. Eisenstadt, and Jürgen Habermas.² In this grand vista of “the Axial” comprising the great civilizations and religions, Japan is naturally an odd man out, having nothing directly to do with the Axial civilizations and religions. In some quarters it has even been given the honor of being designated as an instance of “de-Axialization.” Here, for example, is what Eisenstadt has to say about Japan’s isolationist disposition in reference to “the Axial.”

Domestication of foreign influences (or of internal protest) is not, of course, unique to Japan. It happens all over the world, in many societies and civilizations. The specific aspect of such domestication in the Japanese case has been the strong, and rather paradoxical, tendency to de-Axialize Axial influences on a society-wide level, combined with a continuous openness to outside influence and the development of highly sophisticated discourse—a combination not found in any other great civilization. ... At the same time, Japan has never become,³ in its own collective consciousness, an integral part of other, broader civilizations, even if it has continually been oriented to them and lived with them or under their shadow.

Now let me conclude these long-winded opening remarks by another quote from Eisenstadt. It deals with the special mode of rationality produced by the de-Axializing nature of Japanese mentality.

This specific pattern of de-Axialization also explains the special mode of rationality, of “secular” thought and reflexivity, that has developed in Japan. ... But just because such pragmatic and secular thought, with its *Zweckrationalität* orientation, has been free from metaphysical grounding does not mean it has given rise to a critical *Wertrationalität* discourse, and it has been the nondiscursive “philosophizing in the archaic” that has become predominant in Japan.⁴

What is meant by the second sentence is clear. Japanese rationality, characterized by *Zweckrationalität*, is pragmatic and secular, already free in its native state from metaphysical grounding. By any “Axial standard” such a secular *Rationalität* would not be viable without the accompanying consort of a critical *Wertrationalität* discourse. But it exists in Japan in the pragmatic form of a nondiscursive “philosophizing in the archaic,” a phrase Eisenstadt borrowed from Thomas Kasulis.

A good deal of baggage stands in the way of Japanese philosophy. But this inherited agenda will have far-reaching effects and consequences well beyond the confines that might be first expected by whatever cultural nomenclature we give it. *Nunc agendum est.*

NOTES

Editors’ Note: This article was originally the “Opening Remark” delivered at the workshop “Opening up *tetsugaku*: the making of the *Journal of Japanese Philosophy*” held at the University of Tokyo on January 10, 2014. It provides a context for readers to understand the *JJP* project.

1. Kato Shuichi, *Time and Space in Japanese Culture* (Tokyo: Iwanami-shoten, 2007), 151.
2. Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); R. Bellah and H. Jonas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); *Le religioni e la politica: Espressione di fede e decisione pubbliche*: intervistato da Eduardo Mendieta (Bologna: Centro editoriale dehoniano, 2013).
3. S. N. Eisenstadt, *Japanese Civilization: A Comparative View* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 307–308.
4. *Ibid.*, 308.