An Auseinandersetzung with David W. Johnson’s Watsuji on Nature: Japanese Philosophy in the Wake of Heidegger

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David Johnson’s study of Watsuji Tetsurō provides a “speculative reconstruction” (Johnson 2019: 11) of Watsuji’s philosophy that questions the presuppositions about the self, nature, ethics, and history that form the standpoint of the modern Cartesian tradition. Given Watsuji’s Auseinandersetzung with Heidegger, Johnson focuses on this interconnection, situating Watsuji’s philosophy “within a hermeneutical tradition that includes Herder, Humboldt, Heidegger, and Gadamer” (Johnson 2019: 5).

The three interrelated concepts of Watsuji’s philosophy Johnson articulates are fūdo, relationship (aidagara), and human existence (ningen sonzai). For Watsuji, fūdo is neither nature tout court nor a cultural conception of nature. It is neither objective nor subjective; instead, it is the unitary whole of the two, a whole in which nature is experienced and lived through as a “structural moment of human existence” (ningen sonzai no kōzō keiki), which itself is always already a relationship to others (aidagara), a relationality that forms and is formed by a historical social-cultural world. Fūdo is a fundamental, historical situatedness in which the self always already finds itself engaged with others in the meaningful context of socio-cultural activities; it is “an intertwining and unity in which culture and nature are encountered as a tightly interwoven texture” (Johnson 2019: 179).

The primary objective of Johnson’s study, however, is to “return us to a richer, premodern conception of experience” and, with this, to “a partial reenchantment of nature, and so the possibility of finding ourselves at home in the world once again” (Johnson 2019: 49). And this requires our “overcoming” the perspective of modern scientific “subjectivism” which is the root cause of the disenchantment of nature and the isolation and homelessness of the modern self that is the result of
the modern quantification of nature as an object that can be known and dominated by a scientific subject detached from the lived world.

Johnson’s book is as scholarly as it is philosophically engaging. It is a focused study of Watsuji’s *Auseinandersetzung* with the Heidegger of *Being and Time*. However, the demarcation that sets the clear perimeters of the work also points beyond the work to aspects that are absent and not developed in Johnson’s book. *My Auseinandersetzung* with Johnson’s work is not meant to suggest fault with it. My remarks express a different approach that I believe is complementary to Johnson’s and points to another way of presenting Watsuji.

I would like to begin by saying a word about the subtitle of Johnson’s book, *Japanese Philosophy in the Wake of Heidegger*. The reader should not get the impression from this subtitle that *all* Japanese philosophy operates “in the wake of Heidegger,” which Johnson would readily admit is not the case and was not, I expect, his intention. Nishida, for example, cannot be said to be informed by Heidegger, nor are many other Japanese philosophers working outside the confines of what is known as the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy. The title reinforces the tendency to overstate the importance of Heidegger. The relationship these thinkers have with Heidegger was critical and took the form of an *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger. This is undoubtedly true for Tanabe Hajime, Kuki Shūzō, Nakai Masakazu, Miki Kiyoshi, Nishitani Keiji, Ueda Shizuteru, and Ōhashi Ryōsuke.

Moreover, these same thinkers can equally be said to have developed their philosophical perspectives through an *Auseinandersetzung* with Hegel. Johnson’s presentation clarifies that Watsuji’s philosophy does not simply operate “in the wake of Heidegger” but grows out of a critical *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger. Thus, while “The *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger and Hegel in Japanese Philosophy” might have been a more precise subtitle, it would have been a very different book.

My second observation concerns what Johnson’s framing of his project necessarily leaves out, namely, Watsuji’s *Auseinandersetzung* with Hegel. Although Johnson acknowledges the importance of Hegel for Watsuji, he does not bring Hegel into his reading of Watsuji, presumably because he wants to read Watsuji uniquely from the perspective of Heidegger (Johnson 2019: 3, 110). Hegel is not even included in the index. Fair enough. It might well be argued, however, that Watsuji’s *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger is informed by his *Auseinandersetzung* with Hegel, and making this clear at key points may have enriched Johnson’s account of Watsuji’s *Auseinandersetzung* of Heidegger.

Let me give some examples of where Watsuji’s *Auseinandersetzung* with Hegel might have enriched our understanding of his *Auseinandersetzung* with Heidegger. Given that *fūdosei* is defined by Watsuji as a “structural moment” (*kōzō keiki*) in human life, and the term *keiki* ("moment") here is the Japanese translation of Hegel’s term *Moment*, which possesses a spatial and temporal sense, a discussion of the
meaning of this term and Watsuji’s use of it would have helped to unpack Watsuji’s intention and his critique of Heidegger’s conception of time as not linked to space.

In his reading of Fudo, Johnson intentionally passes over “a substantial portion of the text of Fudo,” in large part because the descriptions given there are “fruitless” (Johnson 2019: 182) and “overgeneralizations” (Johnson 2019: 33). While one can appreciate not wanting to get mired down in the often embarrassing claims about different cultures, it seems that what is at stake in these pages is Watsuji’s Auseinandersetzung with Hegel’s account of how the nature of the geographical regions of the world constitutes the diversities of race. Many of Watsuji’s examples in these pages are taken directly from Hegel. And if, as Johnson acknowledges, “the text of Fudo contains all of Watsuji’s philosophical thinking in nuce” (Johnson 2019: 30), then closer attention needs to be paid to Watsuji’s struggle in these pages to transform Hegel’s account of the importance of nature into his own.

More importantly, one might argue that Watsuji’s critique of Heidegger’s concept of Mitsein has in part been undertaken from the perspective of his Auseinandersetzung with Hegel—that Watsuji’s “‘I’ as ‘we’ and ‘we’ as ‘I’” is a reworking of Hegel’s “‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’” in his Phenomenology of Spirit (Hegel 2007: 110–11). For Hegel, the “‘I’ that is ‘We’” refers to the immanent relation of individuals to their natural and direct state, whereas the “‘We’ that is ‘I’” refers to the constitutive relational unity of the self and other in spiritual life. The point is that a discussion of Watsuji’s concept of ningen as both an individual and social self is in part informed by Watsuji’s Auseinandersetzung with Hegel’s concept of a social self as an I-we relationship.

According to Johnson, Heidegger’s Mitsein notwithstanding, there exists an “ontological dualism of self and other” such that “the self is separate from others” (Johnson 2019: 117). Thus, according to Watsuji, the individuality of Heidegger’s account of Dasein leads to a form of existential solipsism. For Watsuji, however, the self becomes a self only in and through its “interactions” with another self. Johnson illustrates this with an important quote from Watsuji that provides the core of Johnson’s reading of aidagara:

> The act of my seeing you is already prescribed by the act of your seeing me, and the act of my loving you by the act of your loving me. Thus my being conscious of you is intertwined with your being conscious of me. We call this “being-in-relation-to-others” [aidagara] in order to distinguish it from the operation of intentional consciousness. (quoted in Johnson 2019: 87; Watsuji 1992: 10:73)

However, Watsuji also writes the following, which Johnson does not cite:

> According to Hegel, love consists, generally speaking, in the consciousness of “the unity of self and other.” A human being (that is to say, we human beings, insofar as we are involved in social ethics-oriented relations) is not merely
an isolated and independent I, even in her natural and direct state. Only by abandoning independence is it possible for the I to obtain self-awareness of I. In other words, I becomes aware of itself as I only by knowing that it (I) is the unity of the self and other. (Watsuji 1992: 10:87–88, 82–83, emph. added)

Johnson recognizes that there are Heidegger scholars who challenge Watsuji’s critique of Mitsein (cf. Johnson 2019: 74). I would argue, however, that what sets Watsuji’s aidagara apart from Heidegger’s Mitsein is that in aidagara there is a mutual recognition of selves in and through a corresponding with each other; this “mutual relatedness” of persons takes the form of a dialogical, and not simply dialectical, exchange between an I and a you, each expressing themselves to the other, and that this exchange is productive of the very existence of the I and you. The I exists only in responding to a you, and the you in responding to the I. The self ex-sists in the other, and the other ex-sists in the self. Such a performative dialogical relation between the self and the autrui through the manifestation of the face of the other, to speak with Levinas, is wanting in Heidegger’s notion of Mitsein. From what I can see, however, Johnson has not developed the significance of this productive dialogical dynamic of mutual recognition for the ethical aspects of Watsuji’s philosophy. And here, too, it seems to me that Watsuji’s Auseinandersetzung with Hegel is important in that the problem Watsuji confronts here is the unity of the I-you relationship and the situated wholeness in which they always already find themselves and to which they give expression without being absorbed by this relational whole, be it the family, society, or the state (Hegel’s ethical life).

What is more, this notion of expressive dialogue that manifests the lived experience of the life of the I and you would have been helpful in Johnson’s project of a reenchantment of nature in that one could argue that all reality and with it, nature, is dialogically expressive and not simply dialectical. All being appears animated because all being somehow “is in speech,” because all being (nature) linguistically opens itself up and responds. Each relation is linked to the world in this dialogical exchange conditioned by language. For everything “speaks to” (spricht an), to speak with Cassirer. Things and events (Ereignisse), as the German language expresses it, “lay claim to” (Anspruch) the I and you; the world, I, and you form “a linguistic community” that, through their mutual co-respondence (sich-Entsprechen), signifies a real life-community. Ningen sonzai, in its everydayness, constantly manifests itself in the subjective spatiality of aidagara, that is, in acts of expression and life, and these objectifications of human existence express a socio-cultural meaning.

My final observation concerns the nature of culture in Watsuji’s philosophy. In his study, Johnson uses “Watsuji’s ideas as a platform to advance [his] own arguments and ideas about how to think about both our experience of others and our experience of nature” (2019: 11, emph. added). Given the hermeneutical tradition in which he has situated Watsuji, language is dominant in Johnson’s analysis. Johnson
does an excellent job of establishing the function of language in the disclosure of nature and the world. As a Cassirer scholar interested in fūdo not from the perspective of nature but from the perspective of its other constitutive “moment” (keiki), namely culture, I could not help but wonder about the function of other cultural forms such as art and religion, to speak with Cassirer, in the “disclosure of nature” and in the constitution of “our experience of others and our experience of nature” (Johnson 2019: 11, emph. added).

In particular, I wondered why Johnson did not provide an account of religion and art where the experience of expression, and by extension, the encounter of the other, can be said to be central and to take the subject beyond itself. Now, as Johnson correctly points out, “Watsuji was not, fundamentally, a religious thinker” (Johnson 2019: 200). That said, he does say, with reference to Watsuji himself, that “we can also find the phenomenon of fūdo in all of the expressions of human life, such as literature, art, religion, customs” (Johnson 2019: 31; Watsuji 1992: 8:13). For Watsuji, language is a cultural phenomenon, but so are religion and art. Johnson repeatedly points out that “Watsuji explicitly draws on terminology derived from Buddhist philosophy” (Johnson 2019: 110), e.g., the concepts of emptiness (Johnson 2019: 6), “nondualism” (Johnson 2019: 15), and the “body-subject” (Johnson 2019: 94). Just as Johnson recognizes the need to “go beyond what Watsuji said” about nature (Johnson 2019: 11), I would suggest we go beyond what Watsuji has said about religion. Buddhism is not just a philosophy, it is a culturally situated praxis that discloses the world in another way than language or science, even if, or especially because, it uses language. One might argue that the disenchantment of nature brought about by the “scientific image of nature” marks an end to a “religious” experience of nature and that the praxis that would embody a partial re-enchantment of nature marks a return to some sort of “religious” mode of awareness in which all reality is experienced as expressive.

The world’s disenchantment resulted from a cultural rationalization and the devaluation of “religion” in modern society in which the subject becomes the locus of truth. Overcoming the standpoint of subjectivism requires a cultural practice, as in Zen Buddhism, that involves forgetting the self. And while I understand Johnson’s decision not to enter into the later Heidegger, a comparison of Weber’s concept of the disenchantment (Entzauberung) of the world with Heidegger’s concept of the “deworlding of the world” and “degodding” (Entgötterung) of the world in the age of technology would have been interesting in the context of Johnson’s overall project to return us to a partial reenchantment of nature. In the Beiträge zur Philosophie, for example, Heidegger takes up and reverses Weber’s concept of the Entzauberung (disenchantment) of the world and speaks of the Verzauberung (enchantment) of the modern scientific-technological world (Heidegger 2003: 107, 124).
Now, as Johnson points out, the synograph ふ in ふど “can also mean (1) appearance, air; (2) tendency; and (3) style, manner, way” (Johnson 2019: 20). Throughout Watsuji’s analysis of ふど, we see the way, as Johnson writes, “a shared style of life comes to cultural expression” in language, religion, cuisine, and architecture (Johnson 2019: 44). But what is “style” if not an aesthetic form of presence? An aesthetic form that provides the “pattern” (柄) of the betweenness (間) of the relationality of the aidagara (間柄) that we are. In other words: Le style c’est l’homme même, to speak with Buffon.

The disenchantment of nature comes about by the projection of the “scientific image of nature” that enframes the “manifest image of nature” (Johnson 2019: 4), leveling it down to an expressionless dead thing. To avoid confusion, Watsuji clarifies that what is of interest to him is not the natural environment but the “image of ふど” (風土的形象), which is “an expression of subjective human existence” that is the central problem of his study. The ideogram translated here as “image” is keizō (形象) and is made up of the character kei (形) for “form” and the character zō (像) for “image,” and thus is literally a “form-image.” Thus, Watsuji is interested in the “figures” or “shapes” of the expression of ふど as the living “interwoven texture” of nature and culture (Johnson 2019: 179). Keizō refers to the imagination (especially in Kant) and thus to the production of sensible appearance and styles of expression. Johnson recognizes that different cultural forms disclose the world in different ways but decides to focus almost exclusively on language. Johnson writes: “An initial distinction between types of disclosure can be made between the way language discloses by making something present to perception and the way it makes something present to the imagination. We will concentrate on the former mode rather than the latter since we are concerned above all with the relation between language and ふど” (Johnson 2019: 173). Again, while I understand that this would have taken Johnson away from his focus on reading Watsuji and Heidegger, it does seem to me to be a lost opportunity for his central project, which was to help us move beyond the closed subjectivism of the Cartesian scientific subject that can only think about the other and nature but cannot experience the other and nature because it is limited to an object perception that negates the expressive interaction that constitutes the lived experience of the self in the world and with others. In this context, a consideration of Watsuji’s theory of the “Noh mask” in Mask and Persona (Watsuji 2011) may have provided material to further our overcoming of the outlook of scientific subjectivism. What we find in this 1935 essay is an account of the subject that makes manifest itself through expression in the world without ever becoming an object fully present in the world, thus retaining a fundamental “mysteriousness” (155)—which I take to be what Johnson means by a partial re-enchantment of nature. In this text, it is a question of our ability “to interact with others without knowing their faces [顔]. Linguistic expressions [表現] . . . mediate for us. However, in those situations, it is merely that we do not know
the face of the other; it is not that we think of the other as faceless” (150). Watsuji’s analysis of the Noh mask gives an account of “the mystery of the facial surface” to the awareness of life in expression. “The power of art heightens, strengthens, and purifies the facial surface’s mystery with a mask” (152). In religious language, the idol of the objectively present becomes an icon that makes manifest a life by revealing the hidden by hiding it. “The mysterious feeling that one gets from Noh masks is founded on this negativity” (153). In short, the image of fūdo can be said to be the “mask” of nature, the moving figure (sugata姿) through which the face of nature manifests itself as an autrui. Here too a dialogue between Watsuji and Heidegger suggests itself in that, for Heidegger, “visibility is the mask in which factual Dasein lets itself be encountered” (Heidegger 2008: 26).

**Notes**

1. It should be noted that sugata (姿) is not only an important term in speaking of the moving image of nature, but it is one of the names of Buddha.

**References**


