

Watsuji on Nature: An *Auseinandersetzung* with Krueger and Lofts

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I want to thank Stephen Lofts for originally proposing this *Auseinandersetzung* around my book, and thank both Lofts and Joel Krueger for giving their time and attention to this study. Given the amount of space allotted to my reply, I will not be able to address every issue that both raise. Instead, I will concentrate on responding to issues that I see as the most significant.

Krueger proposes to broaden the discussion by looking at ways individuals can be situated outside of *fūdo* (風土); he observes in addition that such a condition is not something that I explicitly address. I welcome this attempt to expand our thinking about *fūdo*, but should point out that the reason I do not discuss the issue of individuals being placed outside of a *fūdo* is that for Watsuji this is not a possibility that is open to us. Watsuji follows Heidegger in understanding the self as constitutively related to, and not intelligible apart from, the wider structure of meaning that is a *world*. This means that *Dasein* and world are intertwined in such a way that what *Dasein* is is not separable from what the world is. So self and world are not two things, they are two profiles of the same thing: *In-der-Welt-sein*. But in taking up and transformatively appropriating Heidegger's concept of *In-der-Welt-sein*, Watsuji shows that *world* is grounded in and continuous with the lived experience of nature (*fūdosei* 風土性). Hence we never find ourselves "outside" of a *fūdo* and facing a purportedly bare natural world. What we can encounter as "nature" is always an experience of, e.g., campgrounds, public ponds, private property, surfing beaches, cropland, riverwalks, protected wilderness areas, etc. This interlacing of nature and world also means that nature as it is disclosed, experienced, and lived through is part of the very structure of human existence. Watsuji calls this geocultural environment, which we both open up and belong to, a *fūdo* (風土).

Notwithstanding these points, the issue here might be reformulated in terms of a consideration of the ways that individuals can be or come to be *alienated* from the world space of the *fūdo* they unavoidably find themselves within, and the significance this phenomenon has for Watsuji's theory. Attending to the darker aspects of our experience of subjective space in this way—as Krueger so effectively does—raises some important issues. As his examples of classrooms, hospitals, mosques, queer clubs, military barracks, and so forth illustrate, the space of a world is scaffolded by human constructions, which, in turn, structure fields of sense that can be enabling and dis-abling for our self-understanding and our conception of ourselves as embodied agents connected to others. This is a welcome expansion of themes from the sixth chapter of the book. There I examined the way that subjective space belongs to the relational structure of the subject itself through the shared understanding that is formed, retained, and expressed by the material infrastructure of a society, so I find myself nodding along in agreement when Krueger reminds us about the negative aspects of the capacity of this space to shape and even determine how subjectivity unfolds.

The issue is somewhat complicated, however, by a closer examination of some specific examples of the manner in which materially embedded meaning forms the subject. Architects have long kept in view the way buildings and other structures do and do not configure a space of affordances—physical but also psychological, moral, and cultural: buildings, monuments, plazas, and other constructions affirm, thwart, or even change our values, expectations, and concerns. They embody values and elicit feelings, but these can be false and even monstrous, as the architecture and civic spaces of Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany, and the Eastern Europe of the Communist Bloc show. Even here, however, there are always those who are left cold or who resist being swept up in this kind of monumentalism—as can be seen in examples such as the dissident movement then and controversies over Spain's Valley of the Fallen now. So while alienation from a collectively shared space can be a sign that our spaces need to be more deliberately organized such that they do not unintentionally exclude or marginalize (e.g., through the lack of accessibility accommodations), alienation can also be an emblem of the depth of subjectivity, of the possession of a sensibility or set of responses that are not simply continuous with the values of the surrounding world. As these examples show, the self is never only passively molded by such structures, subjected to their sense; for such meanings to take hold we must be disposed to receive them—and this is something that is partly up to us. In short, these experiences point to the irreducibility of the person to their environment; they suggest that individuals have the capacity to transcend—in some form—what is culturally and socially given.

Nevertheless, Krueger is right to spotlight instances in which the capacity for resistance or transcendence may not always be sufficient to overcome the forms of alienation found in phenomena such as ontological deprivation. When we

consider his examples of autistic individuals and refugees it is not difficult to see how the format and infrastructure of certain spaces and places can be profoundly disorienting and even deprive some of possibilities for agency, social connection, and the development of a self. This is an idea that is widely applicable across a range social and political analyses and critiques. It intersects, for example, with concerns about the impoverished modes of subjectivity that surface in the homogenous places and spaces that are the dispensation of globalized world. It also enables us to see the sense in which prison architecture in much of the world is itself a form of punishment that extends over and above mere physical confinement in dreary conditions; by damaging selves in these ways, such structures may actively hinder the goal of rehabilitating incarcerated individuals—something which makes all of us safer.

Philosophical reflection on the ontological “deprivation at a more encompassing geocultural level” of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons also has ramifications that reach far beyond the normal inventory of losses that people in such circumstances face. In leaving their home countries, these individuals leave not only the constructed spaces of a particular world (such as places to worship or socialize) but leave behind a world *as a whole*. And as Watsuji shows, *who* we are and can be depends in essential ways upon the geocultural *world* we are located within. Thus, to lose a world is to lose the continuity of nature, culture, and self-understanding that occurs in the phenomenon of *fūdo*. So, for example, yurts, Balinese offering trays, and djellabas emerge from and are tied to the materials, climate, and flora and fauna of specific places. These, in turn, are indispensable elements in the kinds of roles and projects that enable me to interpret myself as, e.g., a djellaba tailor or yurt rug weaver. Watsuji also demonstrates how the notion of self-understanding extends beyond roles and projects to include both the internal and external dimensions of one’s whole way of being in such a world. In this way I come to see myself as someone who has a certain sensibility that is tied quite directly to a specific *fūdo*, such as a love of the sea or a love of yerba mate. Externally, who we understand ourselves to be is reflected in everything from architectural styles and religious customs to cooking methods and recreational activities; all of these things, in turn, are shaped, and at times even determined by, the *fūdo* of a particular region.

And the loss of a geocultural world extends beyond even the loss of possible selves; it entails the loss of a life-way. Jonathan Lear’s philosophical meditation on the collapse and death of the (native American) Crow life-world at the end of the nineteenth century has shown quite clearly just what such a loss comes to. It is a loss different in kind and substance from something as grave as defeat in war or even as catastrophic as the Holocaust. In the aftermath of such occurrences the defeated or the victims have the capacity to try to make sense of what has happened to them; but while the Crow people, like others who have suffered,

continue to exist, their world does not. And with the end—after their move onto a reservation—of the traditional Crow way of life as warriors, hunters, and nomads, comes the end of the social and political structure, the celebrations and religious ceremonies, the narratives and rituals, the adult roles of men and women, and the education, play, and games of children that were directly tied to this life-way. With this the higher aims and values that govern a life are lost such that actions become unmoored from all meaning. Hence this loss, says Lear, “is a *real loss*, not just one that is described from a certain point of view. It is a *real loss of a point of view*” (Lear 2006: 32). And this means that the loss of a life-way “is not itself a happening but is the breakdown of that in terms of which happenings occur” (38).¹ To lose a world is to lose the ability to make sense of one’s actions, projects, and very existence.²

To lose or leave a land, then, is to lose a self, a life-way, and a world. Losses of this kind are by their nature not the sort of thing that can be restituted. They reveal the full sweep of the phenomenon of ontological deprivation and suggest that existential considerations of this sort ought to be—where possible—factored into determinations about which country to settle in not only on the part of refugees, asylum seekers, and displaced persons themselves, but also on the part of governments, NGOs, NPOs, and other organizations and groups involved in assisting them. It may very well be the case that settling in geocultural places and spaces—*fūdo*—that are closer and more familiar to those forced to look for a new home can increase the probability of truly finding one. And while there is not space to pursue this here, an understanding of place as an ontological anchor of the self is not restricted to these issues. Such a conception makes clear, for example, that in the guise of nature and culture, it is *nature* and *self* that converge in *fūdo*. This convergence enables us to see that the damage we do to the natural environment through our practices is also a form of self-harm, one whose consequences and ultimate losses are more than merely physical. Moreover, there is, no way to adequately compensate for damage and loss of this kind—which are not only material but existential and even ontological.

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In his essay, Lofts suggests that I might have paid more attention to Hegel in this monograph; he wonders if I do not bring Hegel into my reading of Watsuji because I want “to read Watsuji uniquely from the perspective of Heidegger” (Lofts 2024: 212). I should probably begin by noting that I do address this issue: in chapter 5 I examined the way Watsuji borrows concepts from Hegel such as *absolute negation* to situate the dialectical movement of *ningen* between individual and communal positions within the metaphysical structure of nondualism. But, as I argued, these terms lack substantive utility; they are often scattered throughout

his discussion in ways that seem only to confuse or obscure the relevant issues. Because his account is so disjointed and so full of ambiguities, rather than simply repeat and endorse the account he gives, I attempt instead to reconstruct this dialectic of individuation and communion. As for the second point, it should probably be said that I do not read Watsuji's thought *in toto* through the lens of Heidegger; I articulate his philosophy of nature (partly) in conjunction with Heidegger's thought because this is what Watsuji himself was explicitly doing—as he makes clear in the preface and first chapter of *Fūdo*.

Lofts next suggests that since Watsuji uses Hegel's term *Moment*, “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” (Lofts 2024: 212–13). I appreciate the thought; the difficulty is that Watsuji himself never really explains what this term means or what his intentions were in making use of it. He even uses this term at times in ways that are not obviously Hegelian, as in his description of clothing, food, and shelter as moments (*keiki* 契機) that express human existence (*ningen sonzai* 人間存在) (Watsuji 1977: 156). While Wawrzyn Warkocki observes that the expression “structural moment” belongs to the technical vocabulary of phenomenology, Augustin Berque is more expansive in his reading, maintaining that Watsuji draws on mechanics, Hegel's philosophy, and phenomenology in his use of *Moment*.³ I would have liked to have heard more and more specifically from Lofts about what a discussion of the term *Moment* as Hegel understands this term would have added either more generally or to my own discussion of Watsuji's criticism of (the early) Heidegger's separation of spatiality from temporality in chapter 8, sec. I.

For Lofts the larger point of introducing Hegel is to indicate where the book might have gone: by linking Watsuji's “I-as-we and we-as-I” to Hegel's philosophy, it might have developed the significance of a “productive dialogical dynamic of mutual recognition for the ethical aspects of Watsuji's philosophy” (Lofts 2024: 214). Lofts is presumably asking for more or something other than the dialogical model of the self that I set out in the fourth and fifth chapters, but it's not clear what this might be. These chapters showed that self and other correspond to one another like players in a game or dancers in a dance, emerging through a chain of expression and understanding that culminates in an ethics of being *between* the individual and social poles of existence. Much of this is well-trodden territory for those working on Watsuji's social and political philosophy, and the philosophical significance of *Anerkennung* is undeniable; but it is not immediately apparent how a more pointed focus on these issues would have been relevant to a book explicitly dedicated to Watsuji's philosophy of nature as it develops in the aftermath of Heidegger's work.

I have more sympathy for Lofts's sketch of a Cassirer-inspired expressive ontology of nature in which nature makes claims on us to which we co-respond,

and his concomitant thought that all being is somehow “in speech” (Lofts 2024: 214). Yet it would not be quite accurate to say that these ideas do not appear in my study at all. I contend that Watsuji’s hermeneutic practice is oriented by the idea that the nature of things can be uncovered by the way we speak and have spoken about them (Johnson 2019: 25) insofar as things—including the things of nature—have a being and meaning of their own which shape, direct, and constrain how we disclose and bring them to expressive articulation (ch. 8), such that it can be said that our lived experience of nature is one of the faces of nature *itself* (205). And this articulation extends beyond language to encompass emotions and practices—as in my example of the way the grandeur of a canyon “speaks” to certain emotions such that feelings are reactions to a phenomenon that presents itself in a certain way, and so responses that grasp and more fully disclose the thing as what it is (195). Notwithstanding this, these ideas are not pursued in an extensive or systematic way; I have found Watsuji’s work less fertile in this regard than that of Nishida, Gadamer, and Merleau-Ponty (see, e.g., Johnson 2014 and 2017).

Lofts also wonders why I do not address the phenomena of art and religion, noting the connection between art, religion, and the expressive, intersubjective, and disclosive aspects of our experience of nature. I was surprised by his puzzlement, since chapter 7 contains an analysis of the experience of *mono no aware*, which is an example taken from the Japanese aesthetic tradition. I used this phenomenon to illustrate how a shared emotional comportment—which is articulated in a shared literary and poetic tradition—can account for the way that nature can take on a certain appearance for the members of a culture and so be disclosed in the same way for a particular community. The same thing can be (and was) said of religion: in my analysis of Watsuji’s contention that the “entire scenery of nature” is also disclosed in a certain way for a culture through practices—including religious practices—I used his example of the practice of sun worship (Johnson 2019: 171, 178).

But in raising the question of religion, Lofts is also pointing to another issue. He rightly suggests that the project of a partial reenchantment of nature requires an overcoming of the standpoint of a modern subjectivism. This is because reenchantment entails an understanding of nature as characterized by qualities and values that we are entitled to take as features of the natural world itself rather than as projections of the human mind. For Lofts, the remedy would be a standpoint that de-centers subjectivity within a reality understood as wholly expressive. He maintains that arriving at such a view requires something like the unselfing achieved in Zen Buddhism, that is, it necessitates a shift to a “religious mode of consciousness.” I appreciate the point but would want to proceed more cautiously given that, as I noted in the book, such approaches are complicated by the fact that the word for religion (*shūkyō* 宗教) was coined in Japan in the mid-nineteenth century to translate a Western practice and concept. I empathize with the underlying intuition

of the religiously-minded that certain forms of naturalism take too much off the scene—and too quickly. But I also follow Jonardon Ganeri in making a distinction between plausible and implausible forms of strong naturalism. The first (plausible) form rejects agents, forces, and entities that lie outside of the familiar and normal course of nature. The second (implausible) form goes substantially beyond the more limited claims of the first and includes under the rubric of the supernatural anything not reducible to a complete fundamental physics. This excludes much of what constitutes what Sellars called the manifest image: the intentional (meaning, thought), the evaluative (the moral and the aesthetic), the abstract, and the secondary (colors, smells, tastes, sounds, and feels).⁴

In this study I pursued a range of strategies for dealing with different thematic contexts in which this second form of strong naturalism appears. I engaged with the work of figures such as Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, McDowell, and Taylor; I also drew on the resources of Buddhist thought in giving an account of the way metaphysical nondualism—which ipso facto presupposes the possibility of selfless states—challenges the commonly accepted dichotomy between fact and value, one that maps onto the distinction between inner and outer that is entailed by a subject-object ontology (Johnson 2019: 199–200). So it is unclear to me how much we disagree here apart from the fact that I find it advisable to remain within the precincts of philosophy in attempting to work out for the culture as a whole a way forward through this highly contested terrain.

In another surprising remark, Lofts takes me to task for deciding “to focus almost exclusively on language” (Lofts 2024: 216) in treating the phenomenon of disclosure. But what, then, to make of chapters 7 and 8, which expended considerable energy on giving an account of practically disposed and affectively oriented modes of *disclosive comportment*? Lofts cites my comment to the effect that we are “concerned above all with the relation between language and *fūdo*” (Lofts 2024: 216). But this passage has a much narrower and more restricted sense than is apparent at first glance. When taken in its full and proper context, it indicates that when I come to treat the phenomenon of linguistic disclosure I intentionally focus on the intertwining of language and perception rather than the relation between language and the imagination because the former is more relevant to questions of the role language plays in the disclosure of *fūdo* (Johnson 2019: 173–74).

In connection with the issue of the imagination, Lofts concludes with the suggestion that “*fūdo* can be said to be the ‘mask’ of nature, the moving figure through which the face of nature manifests itself as an *autrui*” (Lofts 2024: 217).⁵ I certainly share this feeling for the “otherness” of nature, as when I link a “sense of nature as mysterious presence” (Johnson 2019: 37) to the experience of natural spaces and places that harbor an immensity that outstrips human comprehension and control. And nature has many faces; those which we participate in disclosing, belong—in a difficult to articulate sense—to us and we belong to them. Chapter

8 explored in this regard the notion of overcoming subjectivism through the idea found in Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty that our disclosive capacities belong to what is disclosed. What this leaves us with is a dialectical tension—one that we live rather than ever resolve or overcome—between nature as self and nature as mysterious other.

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NOTES

1. John Haugeland co-taught *Being and Time* at the University of Chicago with Lear, who, according to Richard Polt, “would credit Haugeland with helping him explore the phenomenon of the end of a community’s way of life.” See Polt (2013).
2. This example also appeared in Johnson (2021). I thank the *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy* for permission to reprint this passage here.
3. Berque makes this claim in a number of places. See Watsuji (2011) for a list of Berque’s major works.
4. I explore this issue in precisely these terms in Johnson (2023).
5. In his discussion of the image, Lofts romanizes the sinograph compound 形象 as *keizō*, but this should be read *keishō*. The second sinograph is not, as he writes, 像 but rather 象.

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