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Self, World, and Knowledge*

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A Review of *Tanabe Hajime and the Kyoto School: Self, World, and Knowledge*

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Tanabe Hajime and the Kyoto School: Self, World, and Knowledge. By Morisato Takeshi. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, 224 pages, ISBN 978-1-35010-171-5 (hardback), \$90.00, 978-1-35010-170-8 (paperback), \$26.95, 978-1-35010-172-2 (e-book), \$24.25.

Morisato Takeshi's *Tanabe Hajime and the Kyoto School: Self, World, and Knowledge* offers a persuasive response to a challenge once made to its author: Tanabe's philosophy might just be too difficult to teach at the undergraduate level (vii). Tanabe is the middle figure in the founding Kyoto School triumvirate composed of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), and Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990). Though Morisato's text presumes no knowledge of the Kyoto School, specialized knowledge is quietly at work in the background separating out the distinctiveness of Tanabe's ideas. The work is structured to teach three original contributions that Tanabe makes to the history of philosophy: (1) his "logic of species," which engages with the epistemological and practical implications of one's sociopolitical position; (2) his "metanoetics," which challenges the limitation of philosophical inquiry to purely formal thinking; and (3) his ideal of "exclusive complementarity," which denotes a kind of

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interdisciplinary relationship that resists compromise in favor of mutually beneficial specialization. The originality of each of these contributions is difficult to grasp without some knowledge of the influence of Buddhist philosophy on Tanabe's thought. However, Morisato does an excellent job of addressing this difficulty without losing sight of his main goal, which is to facilitate the teaching of Tanabe to undergraduates.

The first half of the book devotes one chapter to each of Tanabe's main contributions, explaining them largely in Morisato's own words and independently of one another. The second half of the book then provides selections from the primary sources in Tanabe's oeuvre through which these three contributions were originally made. Each complementary pair of chapters, then, respectively explains and presents Tanabe's contributions to the topic of "self" through the logic of species, "world" through metanoetics, and "knowledge" through exclusive complementarity. This twofold, tripartite structure will provide instructors with many choices in terms of using the book in an undergraduate classroom—I offer some concrete suggestions below.

An exemplary accomplishment of this book is how Morisato manages to integrate relevant pieces of cultural context without losing sight of his main goal of explaining Tanabe's distinctive philosophy. This is most evident in Morisato's explanation of Tanabe's concept of metanoetics (*zangedō* 懺悔道). Morisato is especially concerned with forestalling two misunderstandings of metanoetics. First, the "noetics" part of "metanoetics" is defined by Morisato in terms of human knowledge equivalent to philosophy (xii). Consequently, metanoetics is not simply "*noesis noeseos*," or the "contemplative activities of self-thinking thought" elucidated in modern European philosophy (36). In contrast to this kind of knowing activity, metanoetics is a way of living and dying, or, to put it in terms better suited to Tanabe, a way of neither living nor dying, because neither the ordinary concept of life nor that of death are adequate to what they mean in metanoetics (108). Second, Morisato explicitly forestalls any misunderstanding of the "meta" in "metanoetics" as implying something

purely transcendent to knowledge, such as blind faith or immediate experience. He points out that the “meta” in “metanoetics” is not separate from “*noesis*,” but instead includes such knowing within itself—even within the part of metanoetics that exceeds mere knowing (51). In this way, Morisato clarifies the metaphysical significance of metanoetics as a view of the world and reality that is “transrational” without being “anti-rational” (27).

The term “metanoetics” is based on the concept of “metanoesis” (*zange* 懺悔) which adapts the notion of penitent confession (*sange* 懺悔) long found in Buddhism to resituate it in the context of modern globalized philosophy of religion. The shift from the strictly Buddhist context to that of modern global philosophy is signaled by the pronunciation of the characters “懺悔” as “*zange*,” rather than “*sange*.” Chapter five includes an excerpt from the introduction to Tanabe’s magnum opus *Philosophy as Meta-noetics* (1946). There, Tanabe self-referentially explains how metanoesis came to signify “repentance for the wrongs I had done” (107). Based on my understanding of Morisato, these wrongs pertained especially to Tanabe’s discomfort with his position as a professor of philosophy at an imperial university where the state was mobilizing his students for a war he did not endorse (103). This is a significant concrete situation by which to read a “metanoetic” criticism of assumptions about the adequacy of formal thinking based on immanent categories of human experience (24, 31).

From this perspective, the decision to do philosophy as metanoetics might come in part from Tanabe’s engagement with the history of European philosophy and its limitations. This engagement, though, is not an abstract one-upmanship but instead a deeply personal and political concern with what Tanabe had come to view as his own limitations. Reflection on these limitations, moreover, was not sufficient to address this concern, nor could the concern be addressed through the creation of a new set of philosophical ideas of a similar kind. Instead, Tanabe called for a new way of philosophizing grounded ineluctably in a sense of “shame for the powerlessness and inability that have driven me to despair and self-

surrender” (107). Morisato succinctly provides the Buddhist concepts necessary for understanding how the sense of powerlessness and inability that Tanabe expresses here does not result in mere inactivity but is instead the condition for a new kind of activity. Based on True Pure Land or “Shin” Buddhist critiques of approaches to achieving enlightenment by way of one’s own efforts, Tanabe’s admission of powerlessness is also an affirmation of, as Morisato puts it, “a breakthrough to the sense of the absolute that is other to itself” (28). The breakthrough referred to here is explained as a realization of the inadequacy of immanent philosophical categories (24-25). Metanoetics, then, is the practice of philosophy able to consciously incorporate this kind of repentance and shame. Significantly, this process does not begin with formal thought, but rather sociopolitical reality. It is in our lived experience of society, and not in epistemic self-reflection, that we encounter true alterity, as it is mediated through the form of other relative beings (24-25).

To understand how Tanabe grapples with sociopolitical reality in a conceptual way, we can also refer to the first historical contribution, noted above: Tanabe’s “logic of species.” Again, Morisato efficiently uses Buddhist concepts to explain the connection between Tanabe’s metanoetics and his logic of species. In my reading of his interpretation, both metanoetics and the logic of species are like the Buddhist teaching of no-self, insofar as they involve a step back from the immanent categories that characterize our ordinary conceptions of identity. Morisato explains this step back as follows:

The self was once fixated on the structure of being as all there is to be talked about. It was also obsessed with itself as the sole ground of comprehending the whole world (and itself therein). But now it becomes aware of the inexplicable ground of all things as that which is other to itself (namely, nothingness) and thereby exhibits its self-awareness as the finite self-aware self, which recognizes its

limitation in its process of understanding the world (and even itself) as what it is. (29)

In my own words, the logic of species seems, then, like Tanabe's preliminary articulation of how one realizes this step back, while his metanoetics completes it. That is, we begin with a step back from our ordinary sense of self (logic of species) and then complete this step back by realizing the true alterity of the world (metanoetics), which transcends our ordinary categories of human knowledge.

There are dimensions of the logic of species that present pedagogical challenges, especially at the undergraduate level. The logic of species is Tanabe's tripartite dialectical conception of no-self, which Morisato represents in terms of the "individual" (e.g., person), "species" (e.g., nationality), and "genus" (e.g., humanity) (6-7). Key to understanding this logic is that "species" (*shu* 種) here refers to a kind of sociopolitical identity. As Morisato explains, in Tanabe's logic, the relationship of species to the limit concept of the genus is determined by the degree of openness any particular species has to other species, as opposed to intrinsic characteristics pertaining to this or that particular species. This point might, however, be difficult for students to grasp if one were to follow Morisato's choice to translate "*shu*" as "species." He makes this choice in explicit opposition to that made by Heisig et al., the editors of *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, who translate this term as "specific." Morisato's choice is prompted by a laudable scholarly desire to maintain the concrete connections between Tanabe's philosophy of nature and his social ontology (59). For scholars, these connections are certainly evocative, but they pose challenges in the undergraduate classroom.

The use of the English word "species" in Tanabe's sociopolitical sense might make some interesting suggestions about how to reconceive biological species, but it also carries negative connotations regarding how we conceive of sociopolitical identity. These connotations, moreover, are not entirely irrelevant, insofar as they bring the historical context of the

logic's inception and uses within Japanese imperialism to the fore, and thus call for careful handling. Morisato does not necessarily prepare instructors to do so, as he only briefly mentions that "genus" was also used by Tanabe during a certain period to refer to "the state" (6). Morisato also briefly mentions that early work on the logic focused on compulsory powers of the state over individuals, but quickly qualifies that this focus was superseded by later work (4, 60).² The relative isolation of these allusions to early forms of the logic makes them easy to miss and assume a background understanding of the problems with Tanabe's early philosophy. In my opinion, the translation of "*shu*" as species requires an instructor to carefully teach Tanabe's logic of species within the problematic sociopolitical context of its inception and uses, as well as with regard to how the logic changes within Tanabe's thought as a whole. But perhaps these are challenges that deserve to be met every time Tanabe is taught at any level.

Morisato does preemptively address some possible misunderstandings of Tanabe's logic of species by means of another deft use of the Buddhist concept of no-self.³ He explains that the logic of species differs from "anything we can call 'self' in an ordinary sense of the word in English (or in Japanese)" by referencing Tanabe's reliance on a concept of no-self from Mahāyāna Buddhism (3). By signaling that Tanabe's use of the term no-self to make sense of identity takes place within a Mahāyāna Buddhist context, Morisato might be suggesting that the logic of species empties out both individual identity and social identity by articulating a relationship between the two that is mediated by an "act of nothingness," but it is up to the reader to either pass over or pursue this contextual significance (3). It is clear in any case that the logic of species offers a modern

² For a critical discussion of Tanabe's logic of species in imperial Japan, readers can refer to Sakai "Subject and Substratum."

³ I appreciate the effectiveness of Morisato's use of Buddhist concepts to explain Tanabe. However, I am not here suggesting that references to Buddhism should be taken to fully address the problem of nonideal applications of Kyoto School ideas within the context of imperialism. This general strategy has already been criticized in Osaki *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire*.

adaptation of this central point of Buddhist doctrine. Positively, this adaptation can speak more directly to contemporary concerns about social identity within the modern nation state than formulations of no-self based solely in the sūtras. This is especially the case in Morisato's presentation, which situates Tanabe as a historical predecessor of contemporary social philosophy by emphasizing his concern with social justice and social solidarity (114). Negatively, the logic of species is a complex topic to study within Tanabe's oeuvre due to the significant changes it undergoes over time—changes that drastically affect the tenability of the original theory, which Tanabe himself repeatedly revised. Morisato addresses this complication by choosing a primary source concerning the logic of species that is situated within the shift in Tanabe's thought. This essay, titled "The Social Ontological Structure of the Logic" (1936), discusses some aspects of the shift. Tanabe writes,

Once I argued that species is that which stands over against species, but this was a result of my unrefined thinking. To clarify this point is one of the main purposes for writing this article and I would like to argue now that a species does not stand over against another species at all; but their relation must remain a matter of differences rather than one of opposition. Those that are different can continuously transition from one [species] to another and they can insert a composite layer without any limit in between them. (83)

In this adjustment to the logic of species, sociopolitical identities are no longer defined by characteristics that exist in logical contradiction but instead by "the coexisting relation of various and different colors in the continuum of color," because every species "already more or less includes other species within it" (83). One can appreciate the scholarly benefit of having chosen this particular essay, but a record of changes like this one raises questions about larger changes in Tanabe's thought. Alongside the record of changes, Morisato maintains the consistency, or at least compatibility, of Tanabe's logic of species with the later philosophy as

metanoetics (xii). Given this complexity, it would be helpful to non-Tanabe experts to have the relationship between these two phases spelled out with even more specificity.

For example, Morisato argues that Tanabe's philosophy as metanoetics provides a superior account of world and reality than any offered in the logic of species (24). This point is well shown with respect to the former's account of the world, but less clear with respect to the latter's limitations. Is the logic of species limited by its having restricted the third mediating term to "genus"? And if so, how do smaller changes like the one presented in the chosen source (i.e., species as relating through difference rather than opposition) fit into this larger issue? This question seems integral to teaching Tanabe's thought as a whole, so a more straightforward explanation of Morisato's views on the limitations of the various versions of the logic of species, and how they relate to Tanabe's later thought, would be helpful.⁴

Finally, I would like to call attention to how Morisato makes an outstanding contribution to both scholarship and undergraduate teaching with his choice to explore the theme of knowledge in Tanabe by way of his philosophy of interdisciplinarity. As Morisato points out, interdisciplinarity is a key value in the university today. It structures the experience of most undergraduate students and deserves reflection at the scholarly level. Helpful at both levels, a translation of Tanabe's essay "Two Aspects of Education in Natural Science" (1936), written for a general audience, is included as chapter six in Morisato's work. As Morisato explains, the key contribution that Tanabe makes in this essay is a distinction between two kinds of interdisciplinarity. First, there is the kind of interdisciplinarity that makes compromises so that interdisciplinary knowledge has nothing that is not of shared interest (148). In this approach, the respective disciplines are like circles in a Venn diagram where the interdisciplinary interests are defined solely by the subset of the intersection of

⁴ Heisig also discusses these changes at an introductory level in *Philosophers of Nothingness*.

overlapping circles, and so exclude anything in either discipline that cannot be shared by both (63-64).⁵ Second, there is an alternative kind of interdisciplinarity that Tanabe theorizes and promotes. This alternative is based on the notion of “mutual complementarity” in quantum physics (Niels Bohr’s *Komplementarität*), especially that pertaining to “complementary exclusiveness” (*komplementäre Ausschließung*). The latter is a relation in which a person cannot appear on “the standpoint where another appears and yet at the same time they mutually complement each other to constitute the whole” (66). For example, to understand a single natural phenomenon like light, one must apply both wave and particle theories even though each theory conceives of light in mutually incompatible ways—that is, one can theorize light either in terms of particles, or in terms of waves, but not pursue both methods of theorization at the same time.

Tanabe argues for the superiority of this second notion of interdisciplinarity and terms it “exclusive complementarity” (*ausschließende Komplementarität*). Distinct from an intersectional approach, which presumes that the area of mutual interest is continuous, connectivity in this alternative approach is facilitated by a conversion, switching, or transformation (*tenkan* 転換) between different theoretical standpoints. Thus, instead of a “both/and” approach, which leads to struggle and a conflict of interests mediated only by compromise, Tanabe terms this alternative a “neither/nor” approach (156). Here, we can again see the influence from a Mahāyāna Buddhist conception of no-self as the kind of standpoint upon which this sense of interdisciplinarity would make sense (174). More pragmatically, Tanabe appeals to the experience of university pedagogues, wherein our teaching and research have a relationship of exclusive

⁵Tanabe’s criticism of approaches to interdisciplinarity based on compromise is also related to Tanabe’s more controversial concept of species, which Sugimoto explains was theorized from a similar need to think about identity as something other than the “middle point” between an individual and a universal (“Tanabe Hajime’s Logic of Species” 54).

complementarity, such that each benefits from the pursuit of the other, without the two being limited to identical content and/or methods (169).

Does Morisato succeed in his task of proving that one can teach Tanabe to undergraduates? He indeed proves that it is both possible and worthwhile. Undergraduates are likely to find Tanabe's critique of purely formal philosophy intuitive, his social ontology familiar, and his notion of interdisciplinarity helpful for structuring their own increasingly diversified studies. Does Morisato provide an instructor with all the tools one would need to teach Tanabe to undergraduates? The theoretical summaries and translation notes are accessible and efficient. The discussion questions provided at the end of each chapter include a range (1) from basic reading comprehension to informed positioning within the history of philosophy; and (2) from connections with familiar life experiences to second-order scholarly debates. Instructors can choose and/or adapt the ones best suited to their own areas or levels of pedagogical practice.

There is one more challenge to consider for those who intend to use this work at the undergraduate level: the three translations are from different sources and the technical terminology occasionally diverges between them and/or the chapters by Morisato that summarize their theoretical contributions. For example, the infamously untranslatable Japanese term "soku (即)," which signals a technical sense of nonduality such as that pertaining to Mahāyāna Buddhist conceptions of the relationship between form and emptiness, is sometimes left as is, in romanized Japanese, and sometimes translated with the Latin term "qua." There is also no discussion justifying these choices. In future editions, a glossary would be a real asset, not only for addressing problems of translation, but also for providing undergraduates with an independent tool for studying Tanabe's texts.

Although the study of all three topics of logic of species (self), metanoetics (world), and mutually exclusive complementarity (knowledge) would suit an upper-year undergraduate philosophy seminar about the Kyoto School, the structure of Morisato's book also facilitates treating

them separately. For example, the more accessible topic of interdisciplinarity could be taught separately in a lower-level course, especially if the course has a focus on epistemology and/or methodology. The more challenging topic of metanoetics could well suit a course that teaches the history of late-modern European philosophy and/or a survey of views concerning the relationship between philosophy and religion. Given the changes Tanabe made to the logic of species over time, it will be more difficult to teach this topic independently from the rest of Tanabe's thought, but Morisato has provided us with his own translation of a text representing a key moment within these changes.⁶

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⁶ An instructor able to manage the differences in translation could also supplement the essay in Morisato's book with Dilworth and Satō's translation of the first chapter of Tanabe's *Dialectic of the Logic of Species*, "The Logic of The Species as Dialectics."

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