

# Yuasa Yasuo's Theory of the Body

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In this essay I would like to present some of the reflections of Yuasa Yasuo 湯浅泰雄 (1925–2005) on the body in order to underscore the importance of the body for our perception of reality. In Euro-American philosophy, the body is generally not given explicit theoretical treatment as one of the factors shaping society and our perception of reality. Yuasa, in contrast, integrates the body as a concept into philosophy. As he himself remarks, he started out by concentrating on the concept of self (*jiko* 自己) but gradually became interested in the body (*shintai* 身体) as a means to further study and understand reality. My aim here is to demonstrate how Yuasa's philosophy of the body developed from a specifically Japanese philosophical background.

No doubt we would be hard pressed to claim that any given idea or concept in Japanese philosophy is entirely unique to Japan. Nevertheless, even concepts that may have been introduced from Europe or elsewhere—such as Nishida's well-known concept of “pure experience” which was inspired originally by William James and Ernst Mach—change as they are taken up and adapted by Japanese thinkers. Thus, for example, Nishida took “pure experience” as the starting point for his philosophy, which was not the case either for James or Mach. Indeed it is the distinctive way in which Nishida “handles” or uses this already extant

concept that is its strong point, not the “invention” of the concept itself. The same may be said of Yuasa’s theory of the body: the idea itself is not new, but Yuasa’s handling of it sheds new light on the role of the body in philosophy—in both ancient Japanese thought and in Ancient Greek ontology as a theory of matter and spirit.

### WHY A “THEORY OF THE BODY”?

Our culture is not body-friendly in the sense that physical well-being is not among the criteria used to evaluate quality of life. Modernity is generally expressed in terms of mathematical figures (economical criteria) and by the degree of democracy and individual freedom (sociological criteria). The state of the body is by and large left out of the evaluative framework. In fact, the idea of well-being stems from a different system of values which itself is in need of more adequate exploration.

To be sure, we have to acknowledge that the place and importance of the body has changed with modernity’s interest in a comprehensive understanding of medicine and diet, so much so that a sort of “body cult” is part and parcel of contemporary life. This way of valuing well-being, however, amounts often to little more than a recent fashion, symbolized by the “wellness centers” that have mushroomed in the major metropolitan centers of the world. Such trendy well-being is not what I have in mind. Instead, I wish to consider how a philosopher like Yuasa presents the body as a counterpart of the mind and expounds on the ways in which mind and body ideally work together in harmony.

### YUASA’S STARTING POINT

At first Yuasa’s interests were focused more on ancient and medieval Japanese thought, and from there turned to pre-modern modes of thought and philosophy [SHANER 1989, 8]. Yuasa concentrated on studying the concept of the self as developed by Nishida Kitarō, Watsuji Tetsurō, Miki Kiyoshi, and Tanabe Hajime, drawing on others authors

as well, such as Hatano Seiichi. Through his study of their writings, as well as of the works of the French existentialist philosopher Merleau-Ponty, Yuasa was inspired to pursue the crucial role played by the body in Japanese intellectual history.

The initial catalyst for Yuasa's theory of the body came from in his own critical readings of European philosophy. For Yuasa, Descartes' separation of mind and body initiated a philosophical tradition in which mind (spirit) and body (matter) are opposed. In the history of ideas, this separation led to the development of two very different, and seemingly incompatible, systems of thought: idealism (in which mind is privileged over the body) and materialism (in which the body is privileged over mind).

Critical of this division, Yuasa followed his own intuitions and set out to reconcile idealism and materialism by approaching the problem of mind and matter not in terms of their opposition but in terms of their harmony. Rather than insisting on their rigid difference, Yuasa treated body and spirit as a whole. In order to accomplish this, Yuasa sought thinkers who were already engaged in this kind of non-dualistic philosophy. In retracing the role of the body through history, Yuasa found that many Asian thinkers took the synergistic nature of the operations of mind and body as a given [SHANER 1989, 234]. This approach to body and mind as a unity was not generally viewed as a "naturally" experienced phenomenon, however, but rather as a synergy requiring conscious effort and special training (*shugyō* 修行). This training often took the form of meditation (either sitting meditation or more dynamic types of meditation through movement), as a practice through which the harmony of mind and body could be cultivated. The goal of such training was typically expressed as the attainment of an "awakening" (*satori* 悟り). Yuasa provides some historical examples in which this kind of awakening is described:

Eisai 榮西 (1141–1215), founder of the Rinzai school of Zen in Japan, calls this awakening of mind and body *shinshin ichinyo* 心身一如, the unity or oneness of heart/mind and body).

Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), founder of the Sōtō school of Zen in Japan, describes the awakening as *shinjin datsuraku* 身心脱落, the

dropping-off of body and heart/mind) in the *Genjō Kōan* chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*. In Dōgen's writings, "dropping-off" body and mind means dropping any distinction between the two. Dōgen and the Sōtō school consider that such awakening is not possible without *zazen* (sitting meditation) and the undertaking of practical duties in daily life (cleaning, preparing food) that naturally and necessarily involve the body.

Myōe (明恵 1173–1232) left behind, according to Yuasa, numerous accounts of "mystical" experiences and coined the term *shinjin gyōnen* 心身凝然, the crystallization of heart/mind and body as an expression of the perfect unity of the two.

The writings of all three monks provide us with testimonies of "out-of-the-ordinary" experiences of "awakening," or an "altered state of consciousness" in which body and mind work together as a unity, and in which any kind of dialectical opposition drops away. Such experiences, achieved through exercise, meditation, or prayer, allow mind and body to function together rather than in opposition.

On the one hand, then, European intellectual history can be characterized in terms of a certain mind-body dualism (which might also be defined as "temporary dualism") that, at least in Descartes' case, served primarily as a methodological approach for defining the human conception of reality through reason and logic. While it is not impossible to conceive of less dualistic approaches to human functioning within the constraints of this tradition, such attempts have never belonged to the mainstream of European philosophical thought. In effect, the scission of mind and body initiated by Descartes can be said to have led Western philosophy into a kind of deep aporia.

In the much longer history of Western philosophy's dualism that begins well before Descartes, the idea that mind and body are taken as two separate but interconnected extremes, in which the spiritual dimension is appreciated and the bodily dimension depreciated, has produced a wide spectrum of variations, occasionally even producing theories so extreme as to argue for the total opposition of mind and body to one another. Such was the case in Plato's theory of perception as well as in

Augustinian and Neo-Platonic religious thought in which matter was considered as an impediment to true knowledge.

On the other hand, we can turn to any number of Japanese thinkers, including the three figures mentioned above, who take up a non-dualistic theory of mind and body, exemplified by *satori* and the unification of mind and body through meditation, as a methodology with which to explore reality in ways even more profound than those which can be accomplished through the use of reason alone. Still, it bears repeating that these practitioners understood this unification to be the result of training and considered the attainment of such altered, higher states of consciousness to be something quite different from the ordinary, everyday workings of the mind and heart.

Yuasa did not restrict his readings to religious thinkers, but also developed his theories of the body through an engagement with modern Japanese philosophers such as Watsuji and Nishida, both of whom had a profound influence on Japanese thought in the twentieth century and beyond. Although Nishida is often thought of as a thinker deeply influenced by the Zen religious tradition, Yuasa considers him to be more an eastern *philosopher* than a spokesman for a specific religious tradition. Nishida, for his part, was also deeply influenced by Western thinkers such as William James and Henri Bergson.

In this regard, one might even argue that Yuasa's interest in Nishida and his elaboration of a theory of the body was indirectly stimulated and influenced by James and Bergson. One thinks directly of the concepts of "pure experience" and "intuition," both developed by James and Bergson in the context of the body and later taken up by Nishida: "pure experience" designating experience in the form of a "continuous stream" that flows prior to the interventions of reason and any awareness of a division between subjects and objects; and "intuition" designating a kind of global consciousness that surpasses a merely rational, self-reflective consciousness. Although Nishida used a fair amount of Neo-Kantian terminology, his thought does not fit well with the Kantian framework of idealistic rationalism. Rather he placed greater emphasis on non-rationalistic intuition as a way of knowing, and this in turn gave him his general propensity for taking religious sentiments and religious approaches more seriously than others before him had done.

### MEDICAL APPROACHES TO BODY AND MIND

As he pursued his studies of the historical relationship between mind and body, Yuasa, eventually became interested in various definitions of science (for instance, objectivistic science and subjectivistic science) and in the medical-scientific approach to the body in its relationship to mind.

Among others, Yuasa studied the writing of Louis Pasteur (1822–1895) in France and Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902) in Germany, who were instrumental in turning medicine into an “objective” science and establishing the foundations of modern medical science, and both of whom made conscious efforts to separate their work from the psychological dimension of human life. Pasteur’s work in bacteriology and the development of antibacterial medications, and Virchow’s investigations into the pathology of cells and experiments with surgical techniques to remove them from the body captured Yuasa’s attention. In the end, however, Yuasa found himself among the many contemporaries of his who found this approach to the human being ultimately dissatisfying.

To underscore the differences between Western medicine and more traditional Eastern medicine, many thinkers turned to some of the beliefs of traditional Chinese medicine, whose influence has spread far and wide across Asia through the centuries. Practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine treat the body as a total living system which “produces” illness rather than as a mechanical system that is attacked from the outside. Accordingly, such practitioners believe that the body itself must be reinforced in order to return it to a state of health; disease and illness are never treated as something that can or should be cut or taken away from the body. In contrast, the typical approach of Western doctors is more akin to that of a mechanic removing some malfunctioning widget or other that has been obstructing the proper functioning of a machine.

For all these reasons, Yuasa was compelled to search beyond the traditional Western natural sciences and to explore other fields and disciplines in the search for an approach that does not treat the body as only a *mechanical* unity or the mind as something directed *exclusively* by reason. This is not to say that he set out to dispose of Western system altogether in favor of an Eastern one, but only that he sought com-

mon ground between them. Yuasa's philosophical project can this be described as an attempt to build a bridge between objective scientific knowledge and intuitive, individual experience in order to answer questions such as: How does meditation act on the body? How can we explain the energy flow induced by acupuncture? How can we reveal the psychological dimensions of medicine?

### THE QUASI-BODY SYSTEM

Yuasa's readings and observations led him to the idea of a "quasi-body system"—a kind of map that represents the link or shared space between mind and body, in which the mental or "energetic" body crosses over into the physiological body. Such a system is hinted at, for example, in the flow of *ki* energy (気) directed by the body's meridians (*keiraku* 経) through a number of acupuncture points (*tsubo* 壺), and tapped into in the practice of acupuncture. In 1974 Motoyama Hiroshi's electro-physiological measurements recorded this energy "scientifically" for the first time, effectively proving the existence of a mental or energetic dimension of the human being. One may well suppose that numerous other phenomenon now classified vaguely as "para-normal" and the widely documented cases of mental healing might also be explained one day on the basis of this system. Today, however, the tendency is to evaluate them primarily for their curative effects, in general avoiding the question of their possible scientific foundations.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Euro-American philosophers rediscovered the importance of the body: William James, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Henri Bergson were among those who sought to develop theories of the body in opposition to the ruling scientific and positivistic interpretations of human life. The matter-mind debate entered a fertile new period and was taken up and developed within the philosophies of existentialism and phenomenology. The idea of an interface between mind and body was explicitly taken up by Bergson in his theory of the "système sensori-moteur." For Bergson, the brain was less an organ of cognition than the organ that coordinates the body's movements; from this perspective, the movement of the body can be understood as the

movement of the mind with the body or in it. Later Maurice Merleau-Ponty took an explicitly phenomenological approach, treating perception as a fundamental act of knowing and understood the body not as a simple object but as a continuous condition of human experience. Life, he argued, is itself a *corporéité* and consciousness is itself corporeal—all in sharp contrast to the received Cartesian mind-body dualism.

This sort of thinking of the relationship between mind and body, as we noted, is well known in alternative forms of medicine (mainly Asian), where human beings are thought to be in control of many bodily functions generally considered beyond the reach of consciousness, “unconscious” functions such as motor reflexes, autonomous nerves, heartbeat, body temperature, perception of pain, and so forth.

#### PRACTICAL VS. THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE

The Western philosophical system, which clearly divides (and even opposes) body and matter from mind and privileges the latter, also tends to value *theoria* over *praxis*. From the Enlightenment on, Descartes' division of mind and body promoted the separation of philosophy (as the analysis of mental ideas) from science (observations of the body and the material world around us) into distinct disciplines.

Here again Yuasa sought to counter this tendency by drawing on traditions of the East in which experience and practical knowledge were generally accepted as the truer approach to reality. In particular, Yuasa located this alternate perspective in what we might call an “Eastern” metaphysics of immanence. From this perspective, individual, personalized experience is seen as authentic and sincere, and therefore meaningful and “true.” Transcendental or universal concepts, on the other hand, are seen as mere abstractions.

Thinking through the assumptions and principal ideas of this native Asian metaphysics, Yuasa locates a fundamental difference between Eastern and Western definitions of knowledge (*chi* 知). According to traditional Eastern thought, true knowledge proceeds from bodily experience (*taiken* 体験) and metaphysics is not separated from the body. In the West, on the other hand, knowledge is almost exclusively considered



to be a mental function and the body as an obstruction, interfering with the mind's true insight into metaphysical truth.

### OF WHAT USE IS A THEORY OF THE BODY FOR EVERYDAY LIFE?

What benefit is there in seeking common ground between spiritual phenomena and traditional science and its methods, as opposed to viewing them as totally unrelated and mutually irrelevant in the realm of theory? One way to clarify the relevance of such a dialogue is through “body scale theory” as used in rural planning and urban studies, both of which are disciplines greatly affected by social and political concerns but which may also be more philosophical in nature.

It is a fact that the majority of people on earth live in urban areas, be they low-density urban zones, in which people generally travel longer distances and thus are often characterized by considerable reliance on automobiles, or high-density areas with well-developed public transportation networks as well as short-distance vehicles such as bicycles, taxis, and motorbikes. Both types of urban life tend to be heavily dependent on “speed,” both in terms of the movement of traffic and the exchange of information and business and transactions. Until recently, speed was valued insofar as it was linked to economic prosperity.

More recent studies, however, have begun to question the value of speed in human interactions and the benefits of automotive speed in the larger context of urban safety. Given that the human brain cannot process interpersonal relations or apply personal values at speeds above 20 miles per hour, the authorization of higher speed limits within urban areas results in higher accident rates and contributed in general to the overall impersonal, anonymous, and even hostile atmosphere of city life.

A European project called “Shared Space” ([www.shared-space.org](http://www.shared-space.org)) has developed new guidelines for traffic “taming” and urban design that show promise in tackling these questions. The principles behind the project can be described as a sort of “back-to-the-body scale” theory. In essence, it advocates the redefinition of public space as a social zone that is capable of functioning in a variety of ways for a variety of users, at the

same time as it allows for interactions between users that are less predictable and more intuitive. Paradoxically, this system promotes a kind of “creative chaos” as a necessary ground for the fostering of responsibility in those who use the system and therefore provide an alternative foundation for public security. Instead of allowing or even promoting the idea of “the faster, the better,” speed in general is discouraged and the apparatus of acceleration is regulated to a degree that speed does not lead to the deterioration of our senses, nerves, and bodily awareness. Taming traffic speed, therefore, fosters human interaction and assures a “body scale” for the urban context. Clearly, taking the body (or, better, the “body-mind”) as our point of reference promotes the development of new solutions to problems of urban planning and traffic control.

## CONCLUSION

Inspired by Yuasa’s work, I have tried to approach the body-mind debate from a practical point of view. How do we understand the body? Is it an obstacle to a more profound understanding, or a tool in its own right with which to achieve authentic insight? We have seen, if only briefly, two very different traditions of thinking regarding the relationship between mind and body. Although the Eastern tradition, as presented here, has been generally depicted as “body friendly” and the Western tradition as generally disposed to favor the mind, Yuasa’s writings not only set out the difference but also open up a number of parallels and connections between the two, which he, in turn, has developed as a genuinely new system of thought.

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