

A Phenomenoetics of Compassion

Modernity in the Non-Western World and its Potential in the Twenty-First Century

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Philosophical potential exists in a unique form in Eastern Asia, where classical spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Confucianism, Laozi, Zhuangzi, and Islam have deep roots. In comparison with the economic and military spheres, it may be said that this potential has yet to be sufficiently developed. Such development would not merely effect changes in the humanities, like philosophy, but would constitute an “event” in the history of civilization. It would realign the forms of the expression of self-awareness that any civilization in the modern era should have.

The modernity that began in the West has encountered various difficulties, giving rise to critical reflections on Western philosophy since the twentieth century, or, if we take Kierkegaard and Nietzsche into consideration, since the latter half of the nineteenth century. The explosive progress in the modernity of the non-Western world in the twenty-first century seems to indicate a new phase in the paradigms of thought. In the past, the critiques of modernity belonged to the self-consciousness of the West. Up until at least the first half of the twentieth century, modernity was essentially an expansion of concentric circles centered on the Western world, which has continued to innovate and change on the basis

of its own classical traditions. But the twentieth century was also the century in which the modernization of the non-Western world began. For Japan, the beginning of modernization dates back to the last three decades of the nineteenth century. This overlapped with Westernization, so that the process represented at the same time an innovation of Japan's own classical traditions. To question tradition is to question the identity of one's own world.

In the twenty-first century a new situation may be expected. The Western essence of modernity will be brought into question, and with it, its self-evidence. According to current statistical estimates, the economy of the Republic of China will surpass that of the U.S. in 2020, and the economic production of India will be almost half of the latter. For reference purposes, Japan's economy is currently one-third that of the U.S. The data suggests that not only is the non-Western world going to surpass the Western world quantitatively, but also that the modern world is undergoing qualitative changes. In the U.S. and France, the descendents of slaves and poor immigrants have gradually changed the make-up of the population, the remarkable result of which has been a transfer in power within these countries and a shift in the electorate. This has also brought about a qualitative change in the national consciousness in both countries. A similar change could take place on a global scale, so that a new sense of history, one with a self-awareness of classical traditions, would take on new philosophical potential.

The process has only just begun, however, and at the moment we cannot easily predict what course it will take. Economic and political power alone do not produce philosophical reflection. A glance at the past shows that, in spite of their power, not all great empires have succeeded in producing an age of philosophy. Furthermore, classical traditions, which in former times belonged only to certain localities, have been partly freed from their geographical limitations through the process of globalization. Classical traditions can now be found globally, and so are also able to act in other cultural spheres. On the one hand, the traditions of Christianity have taken root in Eastern Asia; on the other, the influence of Buddhism can be widely seen in the U.S. and Europe. And in spite of the wall of nation states, the tradition of Judaic thought has permeated the intellectual life of Europe.

What is the second condition necessary to enable the philosophical potential in Japan and China to emerge? What could express “modernity” in the twenty-first century? The answer might lie in a world religion. Modernity has its historical origins in Christian Europe. The philosophy of history is inconceivable apart from Christian eschatology. The opposing tendencies of the enlightenment and secularization turn on the same Christian axis. Therefore, a second condition for the “Asianization” of modernity and the multidimensional variety it would bring to the twenty-first century—but quantitatively and qualitatively—is the classical religious tradition in Eastern Asia which shows a potential for shaping the world in the future.

A decisive factor here is the extent to which the classical traditions of Asia will be able to embrace modern technology in such a way as to give new meaning to those traditions themselves. This, in turn, would introduce a third condition, the development of the philosophical potential of the classical tradition. Looking back over the twentieth century, the modern age has been distanced from religion, even if religion as a political power has exerted an ever greater influence on the world stage. However, religions that keep their archaic rituals lag far behind in their understanding of the world in the modern age. The modern age can do without religion, and the religious world appears to be able to exist apart from the modern age. The distance between the two—if not the antagonism—must somehow be overcome. Technology does not need religion, but it needs a life-world in which to be appropriated and take shape. Every life-world has its own culture, which is essentially local: it “glocalizes” the globalism of technology which would otherwise end up homogenizing and standardizing everything. This “glocalizing” action may be compared to the natural environment that provides a landscape to our concrete network of roads.

The question is if, and how, the classical tradition of world religions can contribute philosophical potential to the “glocalization” of each and every life-world in the twenty-first century. Do classical traditions such as Buddhism or Laozi, caught up in the technological maelstrom of our times, have the potential to give new meaning and understanding to this technologically standardized world? Can they contribute in making the society of the future multi-dimensional and enriching it spiritually? Phil-

ological and academic research on classical texts is still fundamental and indispensable, but such research alone does not exhaust the philosophical potential. What is required is a grasp of the “cross-classical” layer that exists in all classical traditions, and this entails deconstructing classical traditions. Only in this way can we prepare the cultural and spiritual soil for receiving technology and revitalizing it. Looking at the East Asian classical traditions of Buddhism, Confucianism, Laozi, Zhuangzi, Islam, and so on, the common aim of countries such as Japan and China in the twenty-first century must be to locate and develop their philosophical potential in spite of the differences in political systems.

OVERVIEW

In the following section I would like to present my own attempt at locating such philosophical potential. I should point out, given the enormity of the task, I am humbled by the small steps I have to offer. At the same time, the attempt is not mine alone. It reflects the classical traditions of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and the pioneering philosophy of Nishida Kitarō whose roots lie in that Buddhist heritage. Though the pace may be slow, one can only move forward.

I refer to my proposal as a “phenomenoetics of compassion.” The word “compassion” is a key term in Mahāyāna Buddhism, which together with “wisdom” constitutes the concept of “wisdom and compassion”; these correspond to “emptiness and phenomenon.” The general tendency of the religious philosophy of Nishida and his disciples in the Kyoto School was to stress the aspect of wisdom or emptiness. This was largely speculative philosophy “from above.” However, there could be an attempt to philosophize “from below” through phenomenology. In this case the aspects of “compassion” and “phenomenon” should be stressed.

My basic idea of “compassion” is borrowed from Mahāyāna Buddhism, which is not to say that I have taken its full doctrinal context. My intention is rather to take over the same standpoint that Nishitani Keiji adapted in employing the notion of “emptiness.” Concerning his treatment of Buddhist ideas, he writes:

Removed from the frame of their traditional conceptual determina-

tions, therefore, they have been used rather freely and on occasion—although this is not pointed out in every case—introduced to suggest correlations with concepts of modern philosophy. From the viewpoint of traditional conceptual determination, this way of using terminology may seem somewhat careless and, at times, ambiguous. (NISHITANI 1982)

In Buddhist terms, compassion is the “mind” of the Buddha and bodhisattvas who take pity on the suffering of sentient beings and seek to alleviate it. Removed from that particular context, the idea initially surfaces in questions having to do with the “other.” In terms of Buddhist experience, sentient beings and dharmas are both essentially empty. To turn one’s mind and heart to an “other” from this kind of bottomless ground is not *sympathy* extended from a position of superiority or for moral reasons. The other must also be empty in its essential nature. The *Kyōgyōshinshō* reiterates the point: “The bodhisattva, in observing sentient beings, sees that in the final analysis they are nowhere to be found” (UEDA 1987 IV, 17; 391). This kind of experience may be no more than a fleeting glance, something seen in a flash, but it leads us to ask if it might not be possible to develop a phenomenological theory of the other that traditional phenomenology is hard pressed to reach, given that it takes ego-consciousness as the all but self-evident starting point.

If the disclosure of the “other” is inextricably linked to our own “self,” we may expand on the meaning of disclosing the self. The “self” cannot be grasped through reflective knowledge. The self that is objectified in the act of reflection is a *known self* but not a *knowing self*; the self is pushed away in reflective knowing. This is not to say that by nature the self is simply unknowable. We may compare it to a headstream which first becomes manifest when it is flowing in a stream of water. So, too, the headstream of the self that is beyond the grasp of reflections should in fact make itself manifest as one with the existence of the self in an active intuition that breaks through reflective knowledge. As the saying goes, “even after reaching the headstream, the water keeps flowing.” The headstream that can be “reached” is not the real headstream, whose nature is to gush and flow.

So it is with the self that cannot be seen as an object or a substance but is always manifest within actual reality itself. It needs to be backed up by

an experience of the non-objectifiable self and a view of the other *qua* other. In this way the fundamental disclosure of self and other can be designated with the same term—compassion. Clearly this entails an inexhaustible plurality of forms of sensitivity and of manifestations of moods and feelings.

Here “other” does not refer to anything in the singular but to the innumerable that form a world through coexistence and co-activity. The world of the other is always and ever the actual world. The disclosure of the other is the disclosure of the world. This is the third meaning of compassion. In Buddhism this world is also empty. Emptiness is not some dogma imposed from above. It is more like a beam of light that has uprooted traditional notions of ontology, obliging us to rethink them. When ideas such as substance, infinity, and creation are brought head to head with the experience of “emptiness,” they need to return to the fundamentals and to break through the limitations of traditional ontology.

In this way compassion surfaces as a disclosure of self, other, and the world. If we delve deeply into the kind of disclosure we have just described, we would in effect be engaged in a “phenomenology of compassion” concerning self, others, and the world.

However, here I will use the term “phenomenoetics” rather than “phenomenology.” This is a result of having given some thought to the fundamental character of phenomenology. As Husserl insisted, phenomenology must always remain *strenge Wissenschaft*, “strict science.” At the same time, it entertains a fundamental intuition that turns the tables on “science” to confront questions from life and the world—the foundations of all science—and to that extent supersedes science from within. The “seeing” or *noesis* involved in this kind of fundamental intuition is an act that precedes its objectification as “reason” or *logos*. What I refer to as “phenomenoetics” is thus already to be found in the inner recesses of phenomenology. Tanabe Hajime’s idea of metanoetics may come to mind here, but his was a *meta*-project, an attempt to go beyond *noesis*. My focus is rather on understanding the fundamental intuition of a *phenomenon* under the rubric of “intuition” or aesthesis in its deeper sense of the “seeing” of *noesis*.

Another reason for preferring the term “phenomenoetics” to develop this kind of *noesis* and correlate it to *logos* is that I have in mind the

theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a development of the sermons of the Buddha laid out in the sūtras. Buddhist theory was not developed along the lines of objective, cognitive science but was passed on as teachings that in turn became doctrine or dogmatics. One of the problems is that, from a philosophical point of view, Mahāyāna Buddhist theory became stuck in a closed system of dogmatics and did not develop into an open philosophy. Still, it was able to accommodate an intuition more fundamental than the theoretical approach that objectified things and made them into subject matter. It intuits phenomena or *forms*, just there, to be *empty*.

This intuition of emptiness is not knowledge or science but an awakening to existence as it is lived by the self. In this sense Mahāyāna Buddhist theory had the character of a phenomenoetics that precedes and grounds phenomenology. The ideal of what I am calling a “phenomenoetics of compassion” is meant to shed light on the awakening implied in Mahāyāna Buddhist theory.

Compassion as Common Sense

Our consideration of compassion begins with the idea of sensitivity as it is generally explained in the idea of “common sense.” Aristotle was the first to draw attention to this idea of sense in his notion of *koine aisthesis* as a general quality common to the five senses. If we liken the five senses to the five fingers, what Aristotle calls “common sense” would correspond to the palm of the hand. This is particularly striking in the Japanese word for “palm,” *tanagokoro*—literally, the “mind” or “heart” of the hand, which coincides with Aristotle’s suggestion that common sense contains the level of mind and intellect.

Distinct from Aristotle’s use of the term, the ancient Romans referred to the *sensus communis* as a sense that people held in common, much the same as we speak of “common sense” today. The reference to commonality here is to groupings such as race, people, or gender, to which Vico would later supply a historical orientation. In addition to the social level that the term implied, it was deepened to include the aspect of “taste.” Kant referred to this *Geschmacksurteil* as a *sensus communis aestheticus*, by which he meant to include both the subjective judgment of individual taste as

well as the “collective” sharing of aesthetic perception in a defined range of people.

Gadamer drew attention to the dimension of “community” in common sense and eventually came to develop the notion of a “fusion of horizons.” He did not take this as a direct development of the notion of common sense as such, which he continued to understand basically in its traditional sense. As he saw it, the scope of common sense clearly embraced the hermeneutics of artistic production. If common sense extended as far as the level of mind and intellect and thus included conscious judgment and aesthetic consciousness, “sensitivity” would not be restricted to the perceptual sensation (*sentio*) of things. It would also extend to the pain that touches one profoundly in the heart (*patior*). Despite its range of associations with things like suffering, zeal, and passionateness, the word “passion” is better suited as a term to express this kind of sensitivity. Similar to the way the notion of common sense is constructed, when passion is felt in “common,” compassion arises. The *com-* of *commonality* with an “other” is philosophically important. It is another name for the working of *compatior* in which one is receptive, along with an other, to the past, the present, and the future of the world.

As it happens, the English word *compassion* is particularly suited to translate the Mahāyāna Buddhist meaning. It seems fitting here to think of the “deep level” of common sense as overlapping with the Buddhist idea of compassion. In my *Prolegomenon to a Phenomenoetics of Compassion*, I presented compassion as a field of disclosure at the three levels of self, other, and the world. Here I take the further step of understanding it as “historical sensitivity.” We often say that our “heart is struck with grief” at some tragic event of the past, just as we say that our “heart goes out” to the current state of the world or that our “heart is set on” making the future the way it should be. This “heart” is something that arises within us, but at the same time it is something touched off in us by the way things are in the world. It is a state of mind that is past, present, and future; in it the world of the past and the world of the future interact with the world of the present. The subject of this threefold mind is a “world mind” in which this threefold world opens up, and yet at the same time is “my mind” and “my heart.” This is why common sense,

at its deep level of compassion, possesses a level of meaning that we are referring to as “historical sensitivity.”

I should add that the single Chinese character I am interpreting here as compassion (悲) carries the connotation of sadness or sorrow. Taken in the sense it has worldly life and is separate from the context of Buddhist doctrine, it conveys sentiments that belong to proper, convivial behavior. It takes on the meaning of a magnanimous “living together.” Compassion and conviviality can be seen as two sides of the same thing in the sense that, paradoxically, it is in the big-hearted and uplifting things of life that the shadow of death falls thickest. The abyss of nothingness shows itself at the height of the *force de vivre*. Once we grasp this compassion at the depths of common sense, a way of presenting the “historical world” phenomenologically—one that relies on the guiding light of Buddhist experience and at the same time corresponds everywhere to the manifold spectacle of reality—can be expected to open up.

The Common Sense of Non-Commonality

“Sensitivity” undergirds the whole process of the development of mind. In Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, the fields of sensitivity that open up along the way are obscured on the surface of description like veins of ore hidden from sight. Yet it is possible to mine them out through a deconstruction of the work. The deeper one digs, the more one comes to the depths of a common sense.

In the section on “Self-Consciousness” in *Phenomenology of Mind* that deals with the master-slave relationship, Hegel lays the groundwork for a new meaning of common sense in the classical fashion (although he himself never intended it as such). The master faces the slave from a standpoint of authority and absolute control, the decision to grant the slave life or death firmly in hand. The slave, under the fear and threat of death, submits his entire existence to the master. Everything the slave produces through his labor and his very person belongs to the master who accepts it without reserve. The relationship between the master and the slave is a polarized opposition, as are their respective feelings for one another. Hence there appears to be no room to speak of a community of common sense between the two. For example, the “things” that the slave produces are surely received with different sensibilities by master

and slave. The slave is excluded from the satisfaction that the master feels at enjoying the beauty of a pot. Even though it is his own handiwork, he is alienated from the aesthetic appreciation of it. All he can feel in the pot is his own alienation. The relationship between master and slave is itself shaped by both in collaboration. The “place” that brings master and slave together may be called, in Nicholas of Cusa’s phrase, a *coincidentia oppositorum*. This locus of relationship is not marked by homogeneity. Even in the case of ordinary relationships between people, though both are human, to the extent that each remains an “other,” the relationship entails difference and rupture.

Ordinarily, the community of shared perception implied in the term “common sense” contains a tacit assumption of homogeneity within the community. When the judgment of taste that a number of people embrace subjectively with regard to a phenomenon is effectively common, this is because the teleology of that judgment is shaped in concert among the individuals of a community that transcends the individual. We may call this an aesthetic common sense. However, no matter what the community, there will be mutual differences and ruptures obtained in virtue of the otherness. All may appear to be equal as they look at a pot and judge it’s beauty, but all sorts of individual differences remain. These differences are rooted in the way people perceive one another and also in their relationships to one another. A common sense rooted in these kinds of differences is not essentially one of homogeneity; it is bound to contain elements of otherness. When such otherness is minimal, a homogeneous common sense may be thought to arise. Even so, this is the exception, much the same as Euclidean geometry holds true where non-Euclidean geometry reaches its limits.

Master and slave are located on a relational field marked by a polar opposition. The feelings of the master who holds absolute control and of the slave who fears death can be seen as formative elements and the self-determination of a *bashō* of the “self-identity of absolute contradiction.” In this way the feelings that each has for the other are not mere psychological emotions; they are the self-expression of a collective *place* and as such are universal feelings. Because this world is a world whose identity embraces contradictions, the feelings of master and slave represent the common sense of a non-commonality. On this basis, the two faces of

a common sense of non-commonality are shown in the sense of alienation for the slave who creates a splendid piece of pottery but cannot claim it as his own, and the sense of absolute satisfaction for the master who expropriates for himself both the slave and his pot. The dialectical master-slave logic that Hegel develops is enabled by the underpinning of such a common sense of non-commonality.

This way of interpreting common sense is a radical departure from the usual way of conceiving it, which understands “common” in the sense of “homogeneous.” The normal tendency would be to avoid as contradictory the idea of a common sense that contains an opposition of contradictories. But the tacit assumption hidden in this normal way of looking at things, once brought into question, no longer looks so self-evident, namely, that the individual subject is the bearer of common sense. A different perspective allows us to shift our focus to the community in which the individual subject belongs. The community is the true carrier of common sense. This is the core ingredient in the view of a “common sense of non-commonality.”

The next step is to show how the common sense of non-commonality brings out both the disclosure of the “other” and the disclosure of the “world” and “history.” The *Phenomenology of Mind* goes on to describe reason, spirit, religion, and absolute knowledge. Along with this, the common sense of non-commonality already embraces the unbounded interiority and mental spirit referred to as “perception” or “sensitivity,” and can be interchanged with “compassion.” This is expressly stated in the chapter on “Reason,” realized in the chapter on “Spirit,” and made immediate in the chapter on “Religion.” In the final chapter on “Absolute Knowledge,” compassion shows up as the feeling of the “absolute” that arises there.

Nishida’s philosophy of the “*basho* of absolute nothingness” or Nishitani’s philosophy of “emptiness” contain elements of the phenomenoethics of compassion. However, as was stated above, the “*basho* of absolute nothingness” and “emptiness” refer to a religious experience in a deep sense. They attest, on the one hand, to the genuine roots of philosophizing, but on the other hand they present us with a methodological difficulty. The phenomenoethics of compassion is an attempt to philosophize from above while receiving the light of the “*basho* of nothingness”

or “emptiness.” An understanding of the philosophy of these concepts implicitly requires the same experience. Starting from this point, the task is to understand anew, and to give new significance to technology, nature, human beings, language, culture, and so on.

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