

## *Homo Naturalis*

### Andō Shōeki's Understanding of the Human Being

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Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益 (1703–1762) is perhaps one of the most mysterious figures in the intellectual history of Japan. Information about his life is extremely scarce, which makes him seem an even more enigmatic presence. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was never part of a certain school or current of thought, he had very few followers and disciples, and then he remained practically unknown for almost two centuries until being “discovered” by chance in the Meiji period. His writings, which seem arcane and cryptic at first glance, have been read and interpreted in a variety of ways, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century. The range of responses and interpretations that Shōeki's texts have elicited from Japanese and Western scholars alike is impressive, and while this may certainly constitute a testimony to the versatility and profundity of his ideas, it also shows that, as Tucker suggests (2013), many of the interpreters are in fact at a loss when it comes to understanding

Shōeki's place within the socio-cultural and historical contexts of the Tokugawa period, and within the broader frame of the intellectual history of Japan.

To cite just a few examples, Shōeki has been called “an original thinker,” “a Shintoist,” “an obscure physician-scholar,” “an agrarian philosopher,” “a utopian,” “a fascinating naturalist philosopher,” “a radical thinker,” etc. It seems that with every new mention of Shōeki in a study or in a book chapter, a new epithet is added to the list. And yet, we do not have a satisfying answer to the apparently simple question “Just who was this man?” And what is it about his writings that seems to justify all these names and epithets?

As Yasunaga puts it:

The history of the study of Andō Shōeki, which has unfolded for less than a century, is a history of the search for the answer to the basic question “Just who was this man?” It is the history of a struggle to recover a true picture of Andō Shōeki. The thinkers of Asia have not as a rule composed autobiographies; though they record their thoughts, they have traditionally been diffident about providing accounts of their personal lives. Buddhism taught the elimination of the self. Shōeki took this cultural tendency to an extreme of self-abnegation, and we have been forced to rely almost entirely on what others say of him for the few traces of biographical data we have been able to secure. (YASUNAGA 1992, 6–7)

This plethora of epithets actually suggests that Shōeki is an extremely interesting thinker, whose work is exciting enough to trigger so many different interpretations which vary with the period, and the background or the agenda of the interpreters. But the dexterity with which he criticizes and rebukes almost all the major philosophical lineages in East Asian thinking—from Buddhism to Confucianism, and from Shintoism to Daoism—can be quite puzzling for the modern interpreter. If divorced from their historical and intellectual context, Shōeki's ideas are certainly hard to label, as they appear to represent

a deviation from the major philosophical concepts and notions that defined the intellectual landscape in Tokugawa Japan.

This is, most likely, one of the reasons why he was categorized as a “utopian” thinker by some Western interpreters; for example, Morris-Suzuki does indeed consider Shōeki to be a “utopian,” while also emphasizing the fact that his vision of the world must not be understood only in terms of a reference to Nature *qua* physical environment:

During the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), some Japanese thinkers put forward a vision of the universe very close to the “Taoist” end of the spectrum: a vision in which human beings are inseparably integrated into the web of natural relationships. One of the most powerful examples of this approach is to be found in the writings of the utopian eighteenth-century Andō Shōeki (1703–1761). A little caution is needed here, because in Andō’s writings, the word “nature” (*shizen*) means far more than “the physical environment”: rather, it is a metaphysical concept implying the self-existent, the ground of all being. Nevertheless, Andō’s works probably come closer than others to illustrating that absolute absence of division between humans and nature which has sometimes been seen as characteristic of Japanese thought.... (MORRIS-SUZUKI 1998, 40)

Shōeki’s 『自然真営道』 (*The True Way of the Functioning of Nature*<sup>1</sup>), his major work, proposes a vision of the world where two different realms exist: the world of Nature (自然の世) and the world of private law (私法世). The world of nature is primordial, pristine Nature where all forms and manifestations of energy and life exist in an ideal, uncorrupted state, whereas the world of private law represents human society, vitiated by the introduction of man-made laws and thus marred by an estrangement from Nature. The text is a complex work abundant in

1. The title of the work has been translated in various ways: *The Way of the Operation of the Self-acting Truth* (YASUNAGA 1992), *The Way of Natural Spontaneity and Living Truth* (HEISIG 2011), *The Way of the Five Processes and Unitary Generative Force Advancing and Retreating* (TUCKER 2013), etc. For the sake of clarity and brevity, I will translate *shizen* as “Nature” as I feel it is more faithful to Shōeki’s holistic vision.

ideas, concepts, and notions that do indeed sustain a variety of interpretations. Shōeki can certainly be seen as an advocate of physiocracy, or an “agrarian philosopher,” particularly because of the concept of “straight cultivation” (直耕); he is also an outspoken social critic, dissatisfied with the state of things in Tokugawa Japan, especially with the class system and with the destitution of the farmers, which he criticizes by proposing a vision of the world where any social hierarchy is virtually impossible; last but not least, he is also a naturalist philosopher who puts forth an image of Nature as a self-sufficient, complete realm governed exclusively by natural principles and forces.

However, one of Shōeki’s most original and significant contributions is his understanding of the human being, the notion of *hito* envisaged not only as a hub of man-and-woman fused together, but also as an all-encompassing self that expands into all of humankind. There are, of course, differences between the *hito* in the world of Nature and the *hito* in the World of the Private Law: the former is integral to Nature, complete in its is-ness, atemporal, non-relative, and ahistorical; the latter is divorced from Nature, alienated because of the rule of self-serving laws and ideologies, and burdened by the weight of history.

In this paper, I propose an analysis of Shōeki’s vision of the human being *within* the world of Nature, the *hito* before the Fall, in an attempt to emphasize its importance in understanding the philosophy put forth in *The True Way of the Functioning of Nature*. This is part of a larger project meant to clarify Shōeki’s image of Nature and his interpretation of the relationship between the human being and Nature, to contextualize them within the history of thought in Japan and Asia, and to relate them to comparable notions in European philosophy. I develop my analysis in three steps.

First, I discuss the notion of *shizen* in Japan highlighting the differences with the notion of “Nature.” My assumption is that Shōeki was one of the first thinkers to conceive of *shizen* as a totality, a whole that can constitute an object of *theoria*.

In a second step, I move on to analyze the concept of the human

being, concentrating on the principle of “mutual natures” (互性). I suggest that Shōeki’s understanding of the human being is three-leveled, spanning from the single individual to the whole of humankind, and I propose the term *homo naturalis* to refer to this interpretation.

In my third and final step, I discuss the principles that govern and structure the existence and the conduct of the human being in relationship with *shizen*, paying special attention to the notion of straight cultivation and to the three flows of energy: descending, lateral, and ascending (通氣, 橫氣, 逆氣). My conclusion is that Shōeki’s understanding of the human being as *bito* (or, *homo naturalis*) not only can shed light on the evolution of the concept in the history of Japanese philosophy, but it can also provide us with clues useful in the interpretation and discussion of concepts such as self and subjectivity in a global perspective.

#### NATURE IN JAPAN

In contemporary Japanese, *shizen* (自然) is the word generally used to render the English “Nature,” and, morphologically, it functions just like “Nature,” i.e., as a noun. However, as YANABU (1977) points out, the understanding of the term *shizen* in Tokugawa Japan was not “Nature,” but rather “spontaneously acting/doing,” and it was generally used as an adjective, or an adverb. In order to render what we now understand by “Nature,” the Japanese made use of various other terms, many of them of Chinese origin and most of them with a philosophical tinge (Daoist, Confucian, or Buddhist): Heaven-and-Earth (天地), the myriad things (万物), mountains, rivers, plants, and trees 山川草木), mountains, rivers, and the Earth (山河大地), the universe (宇宙), creatures (造物), and so forth.<sup>2</sup>

However, as has been suggested, “none of these nouns refer to any-

2. An interesting (though not exhaustive) list of these terms may be found in ADENEY THOMAS 2001. YANABU 1977 also cites some of these terms when discussing the problem of translating the term *nature*.

thing constitutive or essential” (LEVY 2006, 113). In other words, the Japanese did not have a consciousness of Nature *qua* Nature—Nature was rather seen, or understood, as the sum total of the various parts it was made of (rivers, mountains, etc.), a concrete, palpable reality which could not constitute an object of *theoria*. Nature was not an organic entity, a single whole complete in itself, to be interpreted or conceptualized by the human mind.

As Kawai points out, this understanding of *shizen* was completely different from the meaning of “Nature” in Europe:

Throughout European history, Nature has been a concept which stands in opposition to culture and civilization, and continues to be objectified by human beings. The word “Nature” was translated into Japanese as *shizen*.... Prior to this we did not have a concept of Nature.<sup>3</sup> (KAWAI 1995, 28)

Furthermore, Adeney Thomas notes that the moment when *shizen* became “Nature” was toward the end of the nineteenth century, during the programmatic efforts made by the scholars of the Meiji era to translate (quite literally, in the sense of *translatio*) the various Western concepts that were being introduced to Japan:

Linguist Sagara Tōru gives us a precise date for the standardization of *Shizen*, arguing that “the use of *shizen* as in *shizenkan* (view of nature), *shizen kankyō* (natural environment), *shizen kagaku* (natural science) was fixed around Meiji 30 (1897)”.... By the end of the nineteenth century, the abundant richness and flexibility of the Tokugawa and early Meiji vocabulary were lost in the stolidity of the single word *shizen*.... Many Japanese scholars have emphasized “spontaneity” in defining *shizen*. Needless to say, accentuating “spontaneity” rather than, say, “the environment” as the root meaning of the term diffuses its power to refer to things outside an individual or outside a culture and highlights its

3. Kawai notes that *shizen* “expresses a state in which everything flows spontaneously. There is something like an ever-changing flow in which everything—sky, earth, and humanity—is contained” (KAWAI 1995, 28–9).

reference to inherent, unmanipulated qualities. This *shizen* is best represented by impulses and feelings. (ADENEY THOMAS 2001, 170)

Yanabu also remarks that, for the Japanese, the newly forged concept of *shizen* retained—for a while, at least—its original meaning of spontaneity, which intermingled itself with the new, Western intension. In other words, the moment when “Nature” first became an organic totality for the Japanese, under the guise of *shizen*, was the end of the nineteenth century. It is all the more surprising that Shōeki should have invested the term with so many meanings and nuances, as if he had anticipated what *shizen* would mean one and a half centuries later after the publication of *The True Way of the Functioning of Nature*.

#### SHŌEKI'S *HOMO NATURALIS*

But what kind of vision of the world does Shōeki put forth, after all? And how does the human being fit in this world?

In his own words, Nature (i.e., *shizen*) is a realm made up of spontaneous energies that circulate ceaselessly back and forth from Heaven to Earth, passing, in between, through the ground and the seas in the middle and begetting all creatures:

自然トハ互性妙道ノ号ナリ。互性トハ何ゾ。曰ク、無始無終ナル土活真ノ自行、小大ニ進退スルナリ。小進木・大進火・小退金・大退水ノ四行ナリ。自り進退シテ八氣互性ナリ。木ハ始メヲ主リテ、其ノ性ハ水ナリ。水ハ終リヲ主リテ、其ノ性ハ木ナリ。故ニ木ハ始メニモ非ズ、水ハ終リニモ非ズ無始無終ナリ。火ハ動始ヲ主リテ、其ノ性ハ収終シ、金ハ収終ヲ主リテ、其ノ性ハ動始ス。故ニ無始無終ナリ。是レガ妙道ナリ。妙ハ互性ナリ、道ハ互性ノ感ナリ。是レガ土活真ノ自行ニシテ、不教・不習、不増・不減ニ自り然ルナリ。故ニ是レヲ自然ト謂フ。

Nature is the special name of the Subtle Way of mutual natures. But what are the mutual natures? They are the spontaneous movement of the primary matter of earth—which is beginningless and endless—

which advances and retreats to a greater or lesser degree. [Primary matter] thus creates the four elements: when it advances a little, wood; when it advances a lot: fire; when it retreats a little: metal; when it retreats a lot: water. Spontaneously, by advancing and retreating, [the four elements] create the eight energies, which are mutual natures. Wood controls the beginning, and its nature is water. Water controls the end, and its nature is wood. Therefore, wood is not only beginning, and water is not only end; they both are beginningless and endless. Fire controls the beginning of movement and its nature is stasis; metal controls stasis and its nature is the beginning of movement. Consequently, they both are beginningless and endless. This [dynamic process] is the Subtle Way. It is “subtle” because of the existence of the mutual natures, and it is a “Way” because of the interaction of these mutual natures. This is the spontaneous movement of the primary matter of earth—and it cannot be taught or learned, and it does not increase or decrease—which is created by itself. Therefore, this is called nature.<sup>4</sup> (ASZ I: 63–4)

One of the most important terms in this fragment—apart from *shizen*—is *kasshin* 活真 (which can also be read *ikite makoto*). *Kasshin* is the term coined by Shōeki to designate the primary, fundamental matter, the fabric of all existence. The first character, 活, represents vitality and dynamism, and the second, 真, represents the substantiality and materiality of existence. Thus, *kasshin* conveys a comprehensive view of the energies and forces at play in Shōeki’s vision of the world—it is substantive, material, and, at the same time, it is undifferentiated, unspoiled, primordial, primeval, beginningless and endless.

Shōeki also uses the concept of “mutual natures” (互性), which designates the fundamental way Nature functions. The character 性 here means “embedded feature,” “inner characteristic,” “immanent disposition,” “interior(ized) reciprocity,” etc., and implies that absolutely all constitutive elements found in Nature are in a relationship of functional reciprocity, from Heaven and Earth to the advancing and

4. All translations from *The True Way of the Functioning of Nature* are from the edition of YASUNAGA 1992, modified and adapted to better fit the original. Unless otherwise indicated, all other translations are my own.



retreating energies, to fire and water, to man and woman. For Shōeki, the only connection that can obtain between any two entities is one of “mutual natures,” which means that each of the two entities contains within itself the essence of the other. Thus, they are neither distinct, nor identical; they exist as two sides of the same coin, separated yet inseparable.

Perhaps the best example of “mutual natures” is Shōeki’s understanding of the human being, of man and woman as a single person—man-and-woman:

活真ナル故ニ、常ニ進退・互性ニ妙行シテ、一息止ムコト無シ。…… 男ノ性ハ女、女ノ性ハ男、男女互性ニシテ活真人ナリ。

Primary matter is constantly acting in a subtle manner through the mutual natures of advance and retreat, without a moment’s pause....

The nature of the man is the woman, and the nature of the woman is the man—with their mutual natures of man and woman, they are the human being as manifestation of primary matter. (ASZ I: 113–114)

For Shōeki, the human being, i.e., man-and-woman-as-a-single-person, is not merely a temporary pairing of two different entities. He writes the concept with two ideograms (*otoko* 男 and *onna* 女), but he specifies that this compound should not be read *danjo* but *hito*. Thus, *hito* is more than the sum total of man plus woman as two distinct elements, because it represents in fact a fusion of two forms of existence that, while separated and heterogeneous because of their outward appearance, contain within themselves the valency needed to be combined with each other in an indissoluble union. Just as Heaven and Earth, water and fire, or the flows of energies are inextricably linked in pairs as “mutual natures,” so are man and woman merged into one, in accordance with mutual natures as an ontological principle that underpins all of existence. Since *otoko* is embedded within *onna* and *onna* is embedded within *otoko*, the *hito* resulted from the amalgamation of the two is the epitome of “mutual natures” and the most easily recognizable manifestation of this notion. In a sense, Shōeki’s understand-

ing of the human being as *bito* is not dissimilar to Leibniz's concept of the monad, but it transcends it because the component parts of the *bito* are still distinct and non-identical to each other even though they are fused together as a new, single whole.

Since man and woman both contain the fundamental inner characteristics of the other—which thus become embedded features of their own very essence—they retain the valency and potentiality for union but at the same time conserve and perpetuate their own, separate identity. “Mutual natures” is therefore not a notion of parasitic reciprocity, but a principle of mutual independence in which each of the two entities supports and enhances all the features, characteristics and qualities of the other, thus underlying the image of a *homo naturalis* reconnected with *shizen* and reinstated as a full-fledged component of its realm.

Furthermore, the understanding of the human being as *bito* also has implications that go far beyond the scope of the natural state of man and woman. Since *bito* is a manifestation of “mutual natures” and, as such, part of the intricate system of Nature, it is clear that the world envisaged by Shōeki can never be an anthropocentric universe. The self is not a *res cogitans*, a sentient being contemplating the world from within it, but actually a *homo naturalis*, a mere constituent of this world placed on an equal footing with all the other elements, from plants to crawling creatures. Moreover, not only are one man and one woman fused together into one single person, but all human beings are in a relationship of “mutual natures.” The only connection that a *bito* can establish with another *bito* is one of mutual independence, and thus the concept acquires a whole new dimension as it is used to refer to society at large, not to just one single unit. The notion of the human being understood as *bito* does refer to the ontological characteristics of the individual, but at the same time it encompasses all of humankind, viewed as a complex web of interwoven reciprocities. Therefore, all *bito* are one *bito*, precisely because they are interlinked by the principle of mutual natures—ontologically and epistemologically,

the human being can not just *exist without* the other human beings. One *hito* exists in its is-ness solely because all the other *hito* are at the same time in a relationship of mutuality with it, but different from it.

This vision of the human being seems to share certain notions across time and space with Jean-Paul Sartre’s famous adage “l’enfer, c’est les autres”—not in the sense that our relationships with the others are profoundly vitiated, but in the original sense Sartre had intended, as he explains it himself in his own commentaries to *Huis clos*:

Mais «l’enfer c’est les autres» a été toujours mal compris. On a cru que je voulais dire par là que nos rapports avec les autres étaient toujours empoisonnés, que c’était toujours des rapports infernaux. Or, c’est tout autre chose que je veux dire. Je veux dire que si les rapports avec autrui sont tordus, viciés, alors l’autre ne peut être que l’enfer. Pourquoi? Parce que les autres sont, au fond, ce qu’il y a de plus important en nous-mêmes, pour notre propre connaissance de nous-mêmes. Quand nous pensons sur nous, quand nous essayons de nous connaître, au fond nous usons des connaissances que les autres ont déjà sur nous, nous nous jugeons avec les moyens que les autres ont, nous ont donné, de nous juger. Quoi que je dise sur moi, toujours le jugement d’autrui entre dedans. Quoi que je sente de moi, le jugement d’autrui entre dedans. Ce qui veut dire que, si mes rapports sont mauvais, je me mets dans la totale dépendance d’autrui et alors, en effet, je suis en enfer. Et il existe une quantité de gens dans le monde qui sont en enfer parce qu’ils dépendent trop du jugement d’autrui. Mais cela ne veut nullement dire qu’on ne puisse avoir d’autres rapports avec les autres, ça marque simplement l’importance capitale de tous les autres pour chacun de nous. (SARTRE 2010)

Of course, Shōeki is by no means an existentialist *avant la lettre*, but in his vision of the world *l’autrui* seems to be always present within the self through the principle of “mutual natures.” The mirror of the *autrui* in which the self reflects itself is, however, not a deforming one like in Sartre’s case. For Shōeki, it is the very difference between man and woman, *hito* and *hito*, *hito* and others that warrants and validates the fusion between the two entities as mutual natures, thus actuating their ontological presence. And while the fusion is validated, the indi-

vidual identities are also confirmed and affirmed. But this does not mean that one entity precedes, or is in any way superior to the other, nor that the other exists with the sole purpose of identity construction in a Ricoeurian *ipse-idem* identity dialectic (RICOEUR 1990). Since *shizen* itself is beginningless and endless, the question of time is irrelevant and, as a consequence, the notion of history is meaningless; therefore, the human being (and any other form of existence, for that matter) is ahistorical and non-relative, and there can be no value judgment with regard to its existence and presence in the world, which further means that any type of hierarchy within the realm of Nature is fundamentally impossible and inapposite.

To illustrate this idea, here is a fragment from the “The Great Introduction” (大序卷), where one of the disciples relates the answer Shōeki gave “a certain man” who had asked him a question:

予、転定一体、男女一体、自然・互性ノ妙道ヲ以テ上下・二別無キノ言イハ  
聖人ヲ謗ルニ非ズ、自然・活真・互性ノ妙道ヲ見スノミナリ。

When I say that Heaven-and-Earth are one, just as man and woman are one, and that due to the subtle way of mutual natures within Nature there is no distinction between superior and inferior, my purpose is not to criticize the sages of old, but only to reveal the subtle way of Nature, primary matter, and mutual natures. (ASZ I: 105)

“No distinction between super and inferior” implies that there is no differentiation between the two entities fused together as “mutual natures.” It suggests, at the same time, that both man and woman, *hito* and *hito*, *hito* and the others exist as individual, distinct entities as well. They are simultaneously homogeneous and heterogeneous, innate and immanent within each other. This entails another feature of the human being in Shōeki’s vision: because of the principle of mutual natures, the essence of the *hito* is disseminated within all the others, and therefore the self of one human being is at the same time the self of all other human beings. This means that the whole of humankind, while dispersed into a multitude of individual, separate manifestations, is in fact

one single person, a universal, global “I,” an all-encompassing self that epitomizes human nature. It is the *homo naturalis*, intrinsic to *shizen* as an integral component, unfettered by hierarchies or value systems, rooted at the same time within the self and the others, and affirmed and defined through the unmediated interaction with the others in accordance with the principle of “mutual natures.”

#### THE GOVERNING PRINCIPLES OF EXISTENCE

Another concept of paramount importance for Shōeki’s vision of the world is “straight cultivation” (直耕), which also informs his understanding of the relationship between human beings and Nature. The concept was coined by Shōeki to designate all activities of labor or production, from tilling the land to harvesting crops. But it is also used in a broader sense to refer comprehensively to the sum of all creative activities, whether it be the creative energies and ontological capacities of Nature, or the tasks and actions which underpin the existence of all forms of life, from human beings to plants. In this broader extension, straight cultivation represents both the activity and the outcome of *kasshin*, primary matter.

In a universe governed by straight cultivation, the dynamic flows that constitute the creative powers of heaven are mirrored in all activities of all human beings. Any human act represents, therefore, a reproduction and a continuation of the ontological movements of Nature and, thus, straight cultivation refers comprehensively to the activities and power of creation of both Heaven and human beings. The first and most basic meaning of straight cultivation is undoubtedly the agricultural one, but this meaning becomes subaltern through the abstractization of the term. Thus, when Shōeki states that straight cultivation is the only way for human beings as constitutive elements of *shizen*, he is talking not only about literally, physically tilling the land, but also about something more comprehensive, subtle and intangible, a kind of vague, yet pervasive awareness of all forms of existence that their *raison*

*d'être* is to be in accord with Nature. Moreover, since straight cultivation refers to all activities of creation, its meaning is dilated to such an extent that it becomes all-encompassing: a human being boiling a cup of tea is just as much an instance of straight cultivation as the constant flow of energies creating all creatures and plants on the surface of the Earth.

Here is how Shōeki himself defines the term:

金気、八気互性ヲ備ヒテ八星転・八方星、日月ニ気合シテ転ニ回り、降リテ定ヲ運ビ、八気、互性ヲ備ヒテ、進気ハ四隅、退気ハ四方ニシテ、四時・八節、転ニ升リ、升降、中央ニ和合シテ通・横・逆ヲ決シ、穀・男女・四類・草木、生生ス。是レ活真、無始無終ノ直耕ナリ。故ニ転定、回・日・星・月、八転・八方、通横逆ニ転回スル転定ハ、土活真ノ全体ナリ。

Since it contains within it the mutual natures of the eight energies, the energy of metal produces the eight planets and the stars of the eight directions. In accordance with the sun and the moon, it revolves through heaven and then descends and moves the Earth; the eight energies are mutual natures—progressive energies unfold in the North-East, South-East, South-West and North-West; regressive energies unfold in the East, West, South and North, thus creating the four seasons and the eight periods. [The energies] ascend to Heaven, and after ascending they descend and, in accordance with the land in the middle, they acquire the three directions—descending, lateral, and ascending—and create and produce grains, human beings, the four types of creatures, and vegetation. This is the creative power (“straight cultivation”) of primary matter, beginningless and endless. Consequently, Heaven-and-Earth, the stars, the planets, the sun and the moon—in other words, the Heaven-and Earth which moves in accordance with the three directions—are all manifestations of the energy of primary matter. (ASZ I: 64–5)

As a counterpart to straight cultivation, Shōeki introduces a concept which can be rendered as “non-cultivation” (不耕). He coined this term to refer to the lack, or refusal of any productive or creative activities. However, non-cultivation goes beyond this passive meaning, as it is also used to express a parasitic way of living founded on appropriating the fruit of others’ labor; sometimes, it is also used in a compound

meaning “non-cultivation and insatiable hunger” (不耕貪食) to label the way of life of the ruling class, who steal more than they can eat.

Non-cultivation and insatiable hunger represents a transgression, an infringement of the fundamental principle of “straight cultivation” that should be present in both Heaven and human beings, and it contravenes the relationships of mutuality established among all the entities, energies, and activities in the realm of Nature. It represents a violation of “Heaven’s Way” (Shōeki denounces it as “thieving”) and, as such, it is one of the factors that contributes to the human being’s epistemological and ontological lapse from the fabric of Nature into the World of the Private Law. One who fails, or refuses to practice “straight cultivation” and depends instead on the results of others’ cultivation commits a double offence, first to their fellow human beings (by unjustly appropriating the products of their labor), and then to the principle of straight cultivation (by depriving it of its meaning).

Both “straight cultivation” and “non-cultivation and insatiable hunger” are concepts that Shōeki coins based on his observations of the daily lives of the farmers and peasants living in the isolated fief of Hachinohe, and on his dissatisfaction with a paradigm shift in the way in which these farmers and peasants related to Nature in general and to the land in particular. As Inaba Mamoru indicates, in eighteenth century Tokugawa Japan agricultural production had started to be a goal in itself mainly because of the various taxes, tributes and contributions imposed by the ruling class:

安藤昌益は今の社会の異常さを感知し、深い病理を感じていた。昌益の直接に見た社会は東北の僻村の生活の異常さであるが、しかしこれは単に江戸藩に所属する農村のことであるのみならず、当時の日本の農村であればどこでも見ることの出来るものであった。それは農民生活の窮乏であるが、田畑の荒廢、飢え、農民の逃亡、農村人口の減少といった現象、農村の解体现象として現れていた。その上に重税に次ぐ重税の負荷がこの現象を加速させていた。従ってこれを自然状態として受け入れることは出来ないものであった。これは明らかに人為的な、特に為政者の政治の劣悪

に基づく現象であり、少なくともこうした現象の出現に対して無能無策である支配階級の政治によるところが大きかった。

Andō Shōeki sensed that contemporary society would be in a crisis, and he was aware of the deep roots of the problems. While it is true that the society he witnessed directly was limited to the daily life problems of a small, isolated village in Tōhoku, what he saw in that village in the fief of Hachinohe were things that he could have seen in any other Japanese village at the time. The main problem was the impoverishment of the farmers, which led to a dissolution of the village itself, all too obvious in various phenomena like the dilapidation of cultivated fields, famine, the abandonment of farming, and the decrease in population. Furthermore, the ever-increasing burden of more and more taxes did nothing but accelerate these phenomena. He could not accept all these as the natural state of things. To him, these problems were obviously man-made, caused by the deterioration of the policies enforced by the rulers; the ruling class was to blame, if not for anything else, at least for the fact that they were incompetent and clueless with respect to the appearance of such phenomena. (INABA 2004, 127)

This meant that, in a way, farmers became somewhat divorced from Nature, as the land grew distant since it ceased to represent a manifestation of the *kasshin* as the “primary matter” of existence, and turned into a simple means of production, something that had an economic value attached to it. The estrangement from the land and the weakening of the connection with Nature also divested all forms of straight cultivation (from tilling to harvesting to eating) of their human dimension.

Shōeki’s discontent with the world he was living in determined him to put forth the concept of “straight cultivation” as a means of making sense of society’s ills, while at the same time imagining a primeval world of Nature before the Fall in an endeavor to reestablish the connections among its various components. Moreover, since straight cultivation is the only true way in which the *homo naturalis* can live, it also signifies a rehabilitation of the intricate web of relationships



between human beings and Nature, and a reinstatement of the human being *qua* human being. To accomplish this, Shōeki invests “straight cultivation” with meanings and nuances that exceed and transcend the simple notion of tilling the land; straight cultivation thus becomes all-pervasive and ubiquitous, and its ontological capacity and creative powers become embedded within every gesture or action performed by human beings, including apparently mundane tasks like cooking:

故ニ是レ、炉内ノ薪木、火ヲ燔ヤシ、釣ヲ掛ケ、鍋ヲ用ヒテ、煮水ニ食物ヲ入レ塾蒸シ、潤水ハ蓋ノ下ニ塾味シ、食物成ルハ、食ノ為ナリ。食ハ穀ナリ。穀ハ耕シニ非ズレバ成ラズ。故ニ炉内ノ妙用ハ只食穀ノ為ニシテ、則チ炉土活真ノ直耕ナルコト、妙ニ明ラカナリ。

Therefore, to place the wood in the hearth, to start the flame, to hang the pot by the handle, to place the foodstuff in the boiling water in the pot, to steam it, to bring it to full flavor in the hot water under the lid—this is the process of cooking, and its purpose is [for human beings] to eat. Their food consists of grain. Grain does not grow if it is not cultivated. The only purpose of the subtle action that takes place in the hearth is to prepare the grain to eat. It is splendidly clear that this is [an example of] the straight cultivation of the primary matter of earth in the hearth. (ASZ 1: 81–2)

To sum up, the *bito* in Shōeki’s vision of the world—the *homo naturalis*—is a notion that comprises three different stages: first of all, it is the fusion between man and woman as separate, yet inseparable entities; secondly, it is the interaction between the single person resulted from the fusion and all the others; and thirdly, it is the all-encompassing single self resulted from this interaction. In all these instances, the existence of the human being is governed by the principle of “mutual natures,” while its relationship with the realm of Nature is regulated by the principle of “straight cultivation.” And yet, if this *bito* is ahistorical and non-relative, how does it come into being?

To answer this question, Shōeki forges another new concept: the three energies which flow in Nature and beget all forms of existence according to the direction of their flow. As noted above, these are

descending energy, lateral energy, and ascending energy—three types of movement of primary matter *kasshin*. Descending energy flows downward from Heaven to Earth and begets human beings, lateral energy flows laterally and begets the four kinds of creatures (birds, beasts, crawling creatures, and fishes), whereas ascending energy flows upward from Earth to Heaven and begets the plants (grass, trees, and cereals). The three flows of energy not only generate these forms of existence, but they also sustain their way of living, and determine their environment, conduct, actions and performance. Therefore, human beings created by the descending energy stand and move upright, the birds, beasts, insects and fishes created by the lateral energy fly, run, crawl and swim to the sides, and the grass, trees and cereals created by ascending energy obtain their nourishment from the ground and grow upwards:

吾塾思フニ、転定・央土ニ万物生生スルニ、人ハ通気主宰ニシテ、横逆ノ  
 気ヲ伏シテ人ナリ。故ニ活真ノ通回ニ背カズ、転下一般ニ直耕ノ一業シテ  
 別業無シ。故ニ上下・貴賤・貧富ノ二別無ク、他ヲ食ラハズ他ニ食ハレズ、  
 遣リ取り無ク、相応相応ニ夫婦シテ、真ニ通神ノ人ノ世ナリ。

Here is my informed opinion: in Heaven-and-Earth, as well as on the ground in the middle, there live myriads of creatures. Among them, human beings are dominated by the descending energy and contain within them the lateral energy and the ascending one, and that is precisely why they are human. Consequently, since human beings are traversed by the descending flow of primary matter without any hurdle, their only occupation in the world must be straight cultivation, with no need for any other task. Therefore, among human beings there are no distinctions between superior and inferior, noblemen and laymen, or rich and poor. Human beings do not eat and are not eaten by others, they do not give and take from each other, and each and every one of them finds the right spouse. This is the true state of things of human society. (ASZ 6: 34)

In this fragment, Shōeki mentions the “true state of things of human society,” but he is in fact referring to the prelapsarian world of

Nature, before the Buddhist, Confucian, or Daoist “sages” invented the written word and subsequently the laws that became instruments of control, created history, and eventually led to the demise of *shizen* as an ideal realm. In this world, the three flows of energy are in a constantly dynamic relationship consisting of perpetual, recurring exchanges in which ascending-energy cereals support the existence of lateral-energy creatures, which in turn support the existence of descending-energy human beings, who in turn return to the ground and become nutrients for ascending-energy cereals. Just as man contains the essence of woman and vice versa, the three energies are embedded within each other in an interconnectedness governed, again, by the principle of “mutual natures.”

#### SHŌEKI’S *HITO* IN A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

*The True Way of the Functioning of Nature* also contains four parables<sup>5</sup> in which the birds, the beasts, the crawling creatures and the fishes gather to discuss the world of private law, i.e., human society. They, of course, all come to the conclusion that the world of private law is in no way superior to the world of Nature, as it is corrupted by the laws and ideologies invented by the so-called “sages of old” (which is the term Shōeki uses to refer generically to Buddhist scriptures, Confucian masters, Daoist texts, etc.). The human beings living in the world of private law are just as corrupted as the world they live in and, from the perspective of the creatures, they lost touch with the principles of mutual natures and straight cultivation that govern Nature.

These parables serve a double purpose. First, they allow Shōeki to criticize and denounce both the state of things in Tokugawa Japan, and any kind of ideology. He exposes the injustices of a hierarchical society

5. Tucker identifies Daoist influences in the parables, particularly from the classic *Zhuangzi*: “Equally fascinating is Shōeki’s readiness to convey his ideas with fables, with birds, beasts, fish and insects conversing—again in a Zhuangzi-like manner—about the world of humanity and all its problems.” (TUCKER 2013, 56)

where the ruling class leads a parasitic life by robbing the fruit of the others' labor, just like the local *daimyō* and the *shōgun* do in human society; he mimics and mocks key philosophical concepts, recontextualizing them within fables, thus reducing them to mere caricatures. To give just an example, one of the birds in the dialogues—the cock—calls himself a “superior man” (君子) and a valiant warrior, only to add that “the superior man of human society is nothing more than a selfish and petty confection,” and that he is in fact the true *kunshi* because he was born as such in the world of birds (ASZ 6: 49). Secondly, the parables constitute a channel for Shōeki to expound upon his vision of the world and of the human being, by providing various details on how principles such as straight cultivation function within the different realms. He cites, for instance, the rule stipulating that “the big eat the small” (大ハ小ヲ食フ) as an example of “straight cultivation,” but indicates that this rule applies only in the worlds of the various creatures, and that it should not exist in human society (ASZ 6: 138).

However, at the end of the last parable, that of the fishes, there is a short fragment that suggests that they are more than just creative ways to castigate human corruption and decadence:

右四類ノ世ヲスハ、法世ヲ憎ムニ非ズ。真道ト私法ト大イニ違ヒル妄惑ヲ悲シムノミ。

My description of the worlds of the four types of creatures is not motivated by hatred for human society, but by the sadness at the great difference between the true way [of Nature] and the self-serving law and at the fact that human beings are unaware of that difference. (ASZ 6: 203)

In these sentences, Shōeki hints at the fact that his text is not only (or, not necessarily) a piece of social criticism, and that it actually puts forth an alternative model of the world. In other words, he is not a social philosopher with an agenda who proposes reforms to change the world around him, but a man with a profound, holistic, all-encompassing vision of the universe. If my reading of the fragment is correct, then the *enjeu* of *The True Way of the Functioning of Nature* is not to con-

demn the Tokugawa regime or to rebuke religion and ideology by advocating a return to a primitive, agrarian society, but to posit an entirely new *Weltanschauung*. In this sense, Shōeki is neither a “social philosopher” nor a “naturalist philosopher,” but, simply, just a philosopher.

As we have seen, the concept of *bito* lies at the core of Shōeki’s philosophy. It is a complex notion describing the human being on three levels as closely interlinked with notions like “mutual natures,” “straight cultivation,” and the flows of energy, and integrated into the vast fabric of Nature. This *homo naturalis* is self-sufficient and autonomous, but at the same time in a relationship of reciprocity with the others.

But is this notion of *bito* relevant beyond Shōeki’s texts? Is *homo naturalis* a valid concept in the landscape of Japanese intellectual history? And is it applicable to the context of European philosophy? My answer would have to be yes. Shōeki’s understanding of the relationship between the human being and Nature can open new approaches and angles in the interpretation of theories of the universe proposed by thinkers such as Miura Baien or Yamagata Bantō; at the same time, the *bito* can serve as a point of reference in a possible discussion about the evolution of the concept of human being in the (neo-)Confucian tradition in Tokugawa Japan. Moreover, I think the *homo naturalis* can serve as a solid term of comparison for the Cartesian notion of the self, or for Heidegger’s *Dasein*, and, at the same time, it can offer new insight into the question of subjectivity. Shōeki’s *bito* has the potential to be a concept that remains relevant for today’s philosophical discourse in a global perspective. It is our task to explore this potentiality and to bring it to the fore.

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