

## PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE IN JAPAN. INTERVIEW TO SHINJI KAJITANI

### FILOSOFÍA APLICADA EN JAPÓN. ENTREVISTA A SHINJI KAJITANI

SHINJI KAJITANI – JOSÉ BARRIENTOS-RASTROJO  
University of Tokyo – University of Seville  
shinjiip@kfx.biglobe.ne.jp – barrientos@us.es

*José Barrientos-Rastrojo (JBR): Let me start by asking about your general philosophical background, when did you decide to study philosophy? Why did you make this decision? What was Philosophy for you at that moment? What did you expect of this field?*

Shinji Kajitani (SK): I decided to study philosophy at university when I was 17 years old, in the last year of my high school. Before that, I wanted to major in physics or astronomy, because I was very interested in relativity theory and quantum theory. I was fascinated by the questions like what is time, what is space, what is matter, what is the beginning of the universe, how the life and intelligence came into this world, and so on. I realized they are all philosophical questions, and began to read philosophical books. At the same time, I liked reading Chinese classics such as *Shiji (Records of Grand Historian of China)* by Sima Qian, poetry of Libai or Wang Wei, but also Laozi and Zhuangzi, so I also got strongly interested in Taoism as well. Philosophy was to think, so natural as air and water, but what is vital and indispensable for my life. So I just expect to live with it.

*JBR: What was the philosophical atmosphere where you studied philosophy? Does any kind of interest for a practical approach of Philosophy exist at your university?*

SK: I studied at Kyoto University. Kyoto was the old capital of Japan and is a relatively small city full of tradition. For me, the atmosphere of the city is much more important than that of university. It is calm, slow, unstrained but also condensed, conservative and liberal at the same time. I think such an atmosphere has much influence upon my study at Kyoto University.

At first, during the undergraduate course, I had so much freedom that I had no pressure to do something for lectures or seminars. Professors were rather tolerant (also indifferent) to what students did. That means I did not learn much from professors, which might have been a loss, but I could really think and study by and for myself. It was study groups among students where I learned spontaneously a lot. From lack of proper instruction of teacher, I was probably immature, but also free and independent.

The graduate course was not as liberal as I had expected, but I could somehow keep myself free. I wrote my master's thesis on the problem of death in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. After I entered doctoral course, my professor recommended me to read Hermann Schmitz, founder of New Phenomenology. He is still alive and was not so highly appreciated, so not considered by some as deserving to be the topic of a major, but I became totally fascinated by his philosophy and decided to study it. Though some professors found it absurd and criticized me, I could complete my dissertation and was recognized at the end.

*JBR: Then, you specialised on phenomenology (even you have published Basic Problems of the Phenomenology of Hermann Schmitz), cultural studies and medical history. Can you explain*

*something about your decision and about the content of these areas?*

SK: In my dissertation, I dealt with the theme of body and emotion on the basis of the philosophy of Heidegger and Schmitz. After I finished Ph.D. course, I wanted to do the comparative research, compare European and Asian or modern and pre-modern concept of body. I intended a phenomenological inquiry into the historical change of experience and understanding of human body. For this purpose I did not deal with philosophy or religion as is often the case with most philosophers, but put focus on medicine, because I thought this is a more practical knowledge, and is closer to the reality we usually live than philosophical or religious theory. However, while I read and analysed medical texts, I gradually come to the idea that medicine as theory is still abstract and less closely connected with reality. Then I worked on books on childrearing and healthcare, and thought I could get access to the reality of daily life through the description there. This enabled me to explain the difference of bodily existence in the modern Western world and in the premodern Asian (at least Japanese) world.

JBR: You have written an interesting book, *Bodily and Existence in History and Culture* about Philosophy of Medicine. Could you illustrate its connection to Philosophical Practice?

SK: The contents of the book has no direct connection to philosophical practice. Most of the articles there were written before I got engaged in philosophical practice. But my research on medical history from the phenomenological perspective was a good experience and exercise for me to know that we can start philosophy everywhere from everything. On the other side, when I do something for philosophical practice such as dialogue, workshop, or school lesson, it gives me good opportunities to observe experiences which can be researched from the

phenomenological viewpoint, and that enriches my theoretical inquiry.

*JBR: You are working as a professor of philosophy and intercultural studies at the University of Tokyo, but you are also participating in the activities of the UTCP (University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy). Could you describe its history and aims?*

SK: It was rather a coincidence that I got involved in the activity of the Center (UTCP: University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy). In order to talk about the story about this, let me explain what the UTCP is, because there is the very reason why I am now engaged in the philosophical practice.

The UTCP was started as a part of the government program "21st Century Center of Excellence" (COE). Situated at the University's Komaba campus, UTCP operated for five years, and then further as a "Global COE Program" for another five years. After the government support expired at the end of March 2012, the Center is now newly organized with the sponsorship of the Uehiro Foundation.

For the last 10 years of the COE program, UTCP has been directed by two prominent professors, Yasuo Kobayashi and Takahiro Nakajima, who established and has been managing the Center so far. The Center has been developing new phases of philosophy, not only in terms of theory, but also of practice and built up a wide international network, where students and young researchers were encouraged to develop themselves. In that way, UTCP has valued "face to face connection" in international spaces for discussion and collaboration. According to Prof. Kobayashi, the matter is here not merely "mutual understanding", but creating places in which different peoples of different cultures can live "with one another". A Humanities of co-existence — that is the foundation of the future.

The new UTCP sponsored by the Uehiro Foundation continues to work on the theme of co-existence, its realities, ideals, problems, and solutions. Co-Existence is found in many spheres, such as cultures, states, peoples, races, languages, genders, generations, the healthy and the disabled, urban and rural, modernity and traditions, human and nature, human and technology, and so on. Today, in a globalized world, where everything is more and more closely connected, and there are more conflicts as well as interactions, any kind of co-existence can equally cause problems. The basic principle with which we handle problems is to be called "pluralism". Pluralism means here the rejection of a privileged center or standard, respect of one's own independence and inherent rights or values. To practice this principle, we have various projects. I would like to introduce three of them.

*JBR: The Center for Philosophy has accomplished (and it is accomplishing now) different research projects. Could you explain all of them and sum up their main objectives?*

SK: We have been conducting the following three large projects and they have a common objective: co-existence.

1) Dialogical Practice between Eastern and Western Philosophy  
(Coordinator: Takahiro Nakajima, Tsuyoshi Ishii)

This project tries to create places for inquiring into various problems in today's diversified and multi-polarized world, through international dialogues between western and eastern (or non-western) philosophy. Corresponding to the world situation, we intend to conduct our inquiry in a multipolar way, too.

In this project we do not focus much on comparative studies, which mainly aimed at clarifying differences and similarities between various philosophical traditions. Such studies certainly provide us with an important basis, but should also be critically investigated, because such an attitude is essentially linked with the

search for “cultural identity” and a “philosophical alternative” which are both produced in specific historical and social circumstances. Under the influence of western culture, Japan as well as other Asian countries is westernized in the modern age, while people needed their own identity in finding, even inventing their tradition, so as to counter the western cultural and political power.

In order to be conscious of such historical context and to overcome this limitation, each philosophy must be discussed by researchers of various countries, from every possible viewpoint. In my opinion, it is less the legitimacy of an interpretation and more the validity of each standpoint that is desired here. It seems to be often assumed that a philosophy is best understood in its home country. But research into a philosophy from a different cultural viewpoint can clarify different aspects, and sometimes implicit premises, too.

The necessary condition for such multipolar research is that western and eastern philosophy is studied worldwide. This has been the case with western philosophy for a long time, at least since the end of the nineteenth century. But now eastern philosophy, not only Chinese, but also Japanese philosophy is widely recognized and researched in many countries. That means both western and eastern philosophy cannot be restricted in their own area, and have become common properties in the world, so that they can be read and interpreted from culturally different perspectives: Western philosophy from a Chinese or Japanese viewpoint, and vice versa. So there is not a single standard, but can be many standards for an understanding of each thought.

In such a multipolar situation, dialogue between western and eastern philosophy cannot happen just as comparison, conflict or synthesis, but can be better practiced as cooperation in the common place for question and discussion. This style of research and

interaction would be a proper way of dealing with the issues of co-existence in a globalized society.

## 2) Philosophy of Disability and Co-existence (Coordinator: Kohji Ishihara)

As a result of the disability rights movement and disability studies following the 1970s, the social position of handicapped people has changed from passive, socially excluded objects of treatment and care into active subjects who live with other people in the community. It is certainly an achievement, but deep-rooted prejudices and misunderstandings about people with disabilities persist and they are still regarded as somehow deviant or deficient.

In order to break down such barriers, this project will investigate philosophical questions about disability. The criteria by which people are regarded as disabled seems to be loosely defined in each age and society, but its boundary is always obscure, and whether an individual is categorized as disabled, or the type of condition which can be considered a disability varies from case to case. Even if we can reach a consensus on whether and how someone is disabled, how we locate problems and sufferings depends on the perspectives of those involved, such as disabled people, their families, doctors, nurses, educators, supporters and so on. For a multifaceted approach, this project is conducted by collaborating with them from various standpoints. It will also promote joint research with international researchers, as well as researchers in the natural sciences, such as neuroscience and medicine.

This attempt is especially important in advanced, aging societies such as Japan or other industrialized countries, because the proportion of people with disabilities such as dementia, and various kinds of physical and mental disorders, is rapidly increasing. So the disabilities are no longer exceptions or minorities, but rather becoming just normal and usual. The critical deconstruction and decentralization of the present concept of human being would lead us to its wider and deeper understanding, which corresponds to the

pluralistic world, and create broader possibilities for any kind of co-existence.

The project members are always collaborating with disabled people and care houses to hold seminars, symposiums, and workshops. In this way, they are creating the opportunities for exchange together, where they share information, experience, and the chance to work. Their activities would be a great contribution to change the social circumstances around disabled people.

### 3) Philosophy for Everyone

(Coordinator: Shinji Kajitnai)

This project has been working for philosophical practice such as school education, philosophy cafe or workshop, and try to respond to today's social and historical conditions under the ongoing process of globalization: in a globalized world, values and norms are challenged, changed, or replaced through the interaction with people from different cultures, so that society and individual life have become unstable. People are not sure how to live, act, or think. In such a situation, the opportunity to develop the ability of critical and reflective thinking is essential for everyone, especially for young people to be independent, self-directing in changing, uncertain circumstances. Moreover, in the interaction with diverse people, which brings uncertainty into life, too, it is also important to be open to the ideas of others, so that we can live better with one another.

So the philosophy which is needed today cannot be taken as one of the disciplines studied at universities, should be understood more generally and practically: I myself define philosophy simply as “question, think and talk” and also regard it as the “practice of co-existence”. In that sense, philosophy is not a matter of professionals, but the matter of everyone.

This UTCP project will promote such a philosophical practice with the emphasis on education. To be specific, it is divided into three activities related with each other.



### 1. Cooperation toward Participation in the International Philosophy Olympiad (IPO)

IPO is a philosophy competition for high school students, which has been annually held since 1993. Students are given four hours to write a philosophical essay in a non-native language chosen from the official languages English, French, German, and Spanish. In Japan, as the secretariat of the Japanese IPO Committee is now managed by the Uehiro Foundation that sponsors UTCP. We are working for the instruction of philosophical thinking for Japanese high school students who will make efforts to participate in the world IPO competition, and for this purpose, we annually hold *Philosophy Summer Camp for High Schoolers*.

### 2. Construction of a Network for Philosophical Education

UTCP is trying to build and to expand the network of people who are engaged or interested in philosophical education. Through this network, we share the information, experience and opportunities of the relevant activities such as seminars, workshops, lectures, symposia, etc. It includes our relationship with Dr. Thomas Jackson, director of the PC4 Center of the University of Hawaii.

### 3. Education of College Students through Practice

The general philosophical education should be also helpful and necessary for college students of any major. If they take advantage of such activities as a seminar or workshop, and get accustomed to the practices of questioning, thinking and discussing, their research will be improved as well. For this purpose, UTCP will offer graduate students the opportunity to work as tutors in the education of high school students. They would learn better through teaching than through just being taught.

*JBR: Let's go back to the "Philosophy for everyone" project that you coordinate. Could you clarify its objectives, history, lines of research inquiry, activities and who are its members?*

As I have already given a general explanation of “Philosophy for Everyone” above, I rather write more specific about it including my personal history.

Though I got a position at the University of Tokyo in 2010, I had almost nothing to do with the UTCP, even knew very little about it. But in 2011, for the reorganization of the undergraduate program, a new course of Contemporary Thought was established and Prof. Nakajima and I became its members. After the first course meeting, Nakajima, whom I did not know personally until then, sent me an email to ask whether I was ready to work together for the joint seminar with the University of Hawaii on comparative philosophy. I had not taught in English and was not sure whether I could do that, but I found it very interesting and decided to cooperate with him. And then, as Nakajima was the core member of the UTCP, I began to participate in and work for the activities of the UTCP.

Because the Center was in the last year of the COE program, Kobayashi and Nakajima sought the new financial support for the next period. Then we got contact with the Uehiro Foundation which supports us today. At that time the foundation began to manage the secretariat of the Japanese IPO Committee as well and ask us for cooperation. Among the UTCP members, I willingly proposed a philosophy summer camp for training high schoolers in writing philosophical thinking and writing.

On the other hand, during my stay in Hawaii for the joint seminar, I had an opportunity to meet Dr. Thomas Jackson, a student of Mathew Lipman, and to visit the classes of PC4 (philosophy for children) with his guide. There is a center for PC4, named “Uehiro Academy” which is also sponsored by the same foundation, and this wanted me to meet Jackson and experience PC4 in Hawaii. It was my first encounter with PC4, and really impressed by that. Right after I returned from Hawaii, I decided to

hold a workshop with help of Prof. Tetsuya Kono and Mr. Yosuke Tsuchiya who had been already practicing PC4.

I named the workshop “Philosophy for Everyone”, and there is another encounter which inspired me to choose this title. In Hawaii I met a woman who introduced Hawaiian PC4 into Japan and applies it for community building for the sake of environmental conservation, and she said “The PC4 is not only philosophy for children, but also philosophy for community.” It is then rather natural for me to think that PC4 should be expanded to philosophy for everyone.

This personal background has a great influence upon the objectives and activities of the project. While I am always try to contribute for the school education with PC4 and actually have many opportunities to teach philosophical dialogue in many schools, I also work with people who are engaged in building and developing the local community. So I hold workshops with various topics like “mother”, “money”, “business”, “universe”, “science”, “anime”, “gender”, etc. There is a common purpose in these different activities: transformation of society by means of enhancement of individual and collective initiative through dialogical philosophy. So the members, those who are working with me are students, teachers, mothers, house wives, business persons, artists, actors and actress, local officials, so any kind possible (but less researchers).

*JBR: You have worked on many activities to do with Philosophical Practice. Would you exemplify some of them?*

During the first two years, I tried to organized workshops with various topics, but now I rather let students or other willing partners hold workshops with their own theme. One of them is “philosophy drama” which is a combination of drama and philosophical dialogue, both conducted by actors and participants.

Another example is a series of events for kindergarten children organized by a NPO of “Philosophy for Children and Adults”. I hold classes of philosophical dialogue at elementary, junior and senior high schools, but also collaborate with experts from different fields like artists, designers, scientists etc. Moreover, I gradually shifted the direction of the project to community building: I collaborate with individuals or groups working for development of the area in the suburbs of Tokyo or in farming villages, and introduce philosophy dialogue there in order that people living there enhance their own initiative by questioning, thinking and talking together by themselves. I hope that philosophical practice will contribute to improving society.