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# From Descartes and Hegel to Andō Shōeki and Nishida Kitarō: Philosophy in Japanese Textbooks for Civil Servants (Part 1)

Roman PAŞCA

## Abstract:

In this article, I discuss the way in which philosophical ideas and concepts are incorporated in Japanese textbooks for civil servants (*kōmuin*). In the first part of the article, I focus on Western philosophers such as Descartes, Hegel and Adam Smith in an attempt to analyze the reasons for their inclusion in such textbooks. My conclusion is that while the concepts and notions presented in the textbooks are relatively numerous and diversified, their understanding is, at least in some cases, erroneous or misleading, and no connection is made between their ideas and official guidelines that describe civil service in Japan. In the second part of the article I will discuss the rationale behind the selection of Japanese thinkers and analyze the manner in which their ideas are presented.

This research is part of a larger project that aims to analyze the way in which philosophical ideas — both Western and Japanese — are integrated into the Japanese educational system (in textbooks, guidelines for schools, teachers' manuals and various other documents and materials etc.).

## 1 . What is a civil servant supposed to know?

The textbook I analyze in the first part of this article is called *Kōmuin no kyōkasho. Shakai ben* 公務員の教科書 社会編 (“Textbook for Civil Servants — Society Edition”) and is authored by Itō Yukio 伊藤章雄, a former top-level bureaucrat with the Tōkyō Metropolitan government. The first edition of the book was published in 2009 and is part of a series that also includes a *Kokugo ben* 国語編 (“Japanese Language and Culture Edition”), a *Sansū/sūgaku ben* 算数・数学編 (“Calculus / Arithmetics Edition”), and a *Dōtoku ben* 道徳編 (“Ethics Edition”). They are all published by Gyōsei gijyōsei, a publishing house in Tōkyō whose portfolio consists

of a wide variety of non-fiction books, treatises and catalogs, ranging from Japanese language learning materials such as *kana* and *kanji* charts and dictionaries to history textbooks, atlases, as well as miscellaneous reports and materials issued by local administrative units and governing bodies.

The textbook consists of four chapters: *Gendai shakai ben* 現代社会編 (“Contemporary Society”), *Tetsugaku / shisō ben* 哲学・思想 (“Philosophy / Thought”), *Rekishi ben* 歴史編 (“History”), and *Kokusai chishiki ben* 国際知識編 (“Knowledge about the World”). There is also a brief introductory chapter, and a short list of references at the end. The textbook is not — nor does it claim to be — an academic book, and as such the style and formatting are relatively loose, as they do not have the scientific paper-like stiffness and rigor, e.g. with respect to quotations or bibliographic references. Nowhere is this specifically mentioned, but the book seems to be meant for those who aspire to become civil servants (in particular students and graduate students), and those who are civil servants already but want to upgrade their skills.

The title of the introductory chapter (*Joshō* 序章) is in fact a question: *Kōmuin ni motomerareru shakai chishiki to wa?!* 公務員に求められる社会知識とは?! (“What is a civil servant supposed to know about society?”). In it, the author lays out a few of the attributes, qualities and conditions that, in his vision, make up the image of the civil servant in Japan, as well as some of the principles and norms that should regulate and govern the activities of a civil servant. In an attempt to draw a portrait of the “ideal *kōmuin*”, the chapter begins with a very simple and schematic definition of society:

Society is the circle (*wa* 輪) of human beings that appears when individuals come into contact with each other. This circle is also called “the world”, or “the public sphere” (*se-*

*ken* 世間). The lives of the individuals begin when they enter this circle, and end when they exit it<sup>1</sup>. (2009)

It then goes on with an adage about the role of the central and the local governments, which is mainly to regulate and adjust this “circle” (*kono wa no kanri chōsei* この輪の管理調整), adding that the guiding principle for any governing body should be that of “the greatest happiness of the greatest number” (*saidai tasū no saidai kōfuku* 最大多数の最大幸福) as put forth by Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. However, even though the short quote from Bentham is emphasized in bold letters (but lacks any reference whatsoever), it is truncated and does not include the second part (“that is the measure of right and wrong”), thus oversimplifying Utilitarian thinking and the philosopher’s view on society and the mechanisms that should regulate it. Itō, in fact, immediately jumps to the conclusion that what is needed in a civil servant in order to follow this principle are attributes such as judgment (*bandan* 判断), determination (*ketsudan* 決断), and selection (*sentaku* 選択). As we will see in the following sections, the tendency of the author to reduce philosophical ideas and concepts to axiom-like, bite-sized expressions — that are not entirely and necessarily in accordance with the original — is manifest throughout the textbook.

The introduction also mentions a maxim that is widely circulated in the world of civil service, representing, in the author’s view, an ironclad rule (*tessoku* 鉄則) with respect to what and how a civil servant should study: “[your] knowledge should be shallow and wide, and detailed in only one aspect” (*chishiki wa asaku hiroku, hitotsu dake kuwashiku* 知識は浅く広く、一つだけくわしく). The last part of the maxim (“detailed in only one aspect”) is presented in connection with the professionalism of the civil servant who, according to Itō, should have a high level of expertise and a compre-

hensive outlook on the field that he / she is in charge of in a particular administrative unit.

Starting from Bentham's principle and the maxim above, the author reviews some of the most important qualities a *kōmuin* should possess. Thus, he suggests that the fundamental one is judgment (*bandan*), as it is the essential attribute that enables the civil servant to distinguish and select what is necessary in each situation based on the knowledge and information that he / she possesses about a certain topic. As Itō puts it, the “amount of greatest happiness” (*saidai kōfukuryō* 最大幸福量) should be directly proportional to the amount of worries (*nayami no ryō* 悩みの量) of the *kōmuin*, as “worries” are the element that underlies and stimulates judgment. In order to have a sound judgment and to be able to use it quickly whenever the necessity arises, the *kōmuin* needs to have know-how and to be familiar with the principles and value systems prevalent in society:

The daily lives of individuals move according to a cycle of certain regulations and principles, and history. [The *kōmuin*] needs to master this cycle. (2009)

After drawing this fragmentary and rather imprecise portrait of the ideal civil servant, the author moves on to discuss the purpose of the book, which is “to create an opportunity to retrieve (*torimodosu* 取り戻す) all the knowledge and information” relating to history, politics, economy, urban life, and culture that the *kōmuin* are supposed to have acquired in school and through reading or various other activities. In other words, the main aim of the book is not to provide readers with new content, but to serve as a mnemonic device that can kindle and reactivate dormant facts and skills. Therefore, Itō claims, the book presents information and ideas that can be useful to the civil servant when performing his /

her duties in accordance with the “public spirit” (*paburikku seishin* パブリック精神) that should govern the behavior of all bureaucrats.

Contrary to expectations, the introduction offers no justification whatsoever about the choices the author made with respect to the structure or the contents of the textbook. Some details are provided at the beginning of each chapter, but it remains unclear whether the table of contents reflects in any way official guidelines or curricula pertaining to the education and / or training of aspiring or active *kōmuin*. Moreover, Itō uses certain terms and notions without explaining them, thus maintaining a relatively high level of ambiguity with regard to the scope and intention of the book. To give just one example, he uses the phrase *kokka no genkei* 国家の原型 (“model of state”), but fails to clarify what he understands by *kokka* and what particular model he is referring to until much later (Chapter 1 in Part 3).

## 2 . The need for philosophy

As I have already shown, Parts 1, 3 and 4 of the textbook discuss contemporary society, history, and international relations. Thus, Part 1, Chapter 1 *Shakai to kokka* 社会と国家 (“Society and state”) attempts to give a more detailed definition of society by citing philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke, paying particular attention to their understanding of the “social contract”. Chapter 2 *Kuni to chihō* 国と地方 (“Central and local governments”) discusses the evolution of urban life, the idea of public governance, and the relationship between the central government and the local administration. In Part 3, Chapter 1 *Nihon kokka no genkei* 日本国家の原型 (“Model of the Japanese state”), the author starts with a quick review of the oldest extant records of Japan as “*Wa*” 倭, touches briefly on Prince Shōtoku’s Seventeen-article constitution and on the Ritsuryō code

and then moves on to the Heian period. Chapter 2 *Kindai nibon kokka no genkei* 近代日本国家の原型 (“Model of the modern Japanese state”) presents the changes that occurred during the Meiji Restoration, especially the administrative reorganization of the country and the appearance of the notion of “region” as opposed to the “capital”. Part 4, Chapter 1 *Shokuryō / kankyō mondai ga kokusai mondai o kangaeru genen* 食料・環境問題が国際問題を考える原点 (“Food and environment problems as perspectives in international relations”) discusses Japan’s food self-sufficiency, as well as the involvement in various international programs and organizations meant to support developing countries. Chapter 2 *Sekai to Nihon* 世界と日本 (“The world and Japan”) provides details on the economic and cultural relationships Japan established with a series of countries around the world, from China and Korea to Turkey, Greece and Egypt.

In this and the following sections, I will focus on Part 2, which is dedicated to philosophical texts and to their possible usage in government and civil service. In the first part of my article, I will briefly discuss Chapter 1 *Tetsugaku / shisō* 哲学・思想 (“Philosophy / thought”) and then move on to Chapter 2 *Nihon no shisō* 日本の思想 (“Japanese thought”) in the second part. Incidentally, it might be interesting to note that Itō seems to make a difference between the terms *tetsugaku* and *shisō*: thus, he only uses the former in connection to Western philosophy, whereas the latter is applied to both Western and Japanese notions. It is not clear, however, if there is any difference in meaning and intension between the two.

First of all, how does the author explain his choice to include philosophy in this textbook? How is it related to the education or training of *kōmuin*? In the first section of Chapter 1, Part 2, he tries to answer these questions:

[Philosophy] is not complicated at all. Philosophy is a permanent presence in our daily lives. When we come across something we do not understand, we ask ourselves “Why?”. And then, we look for answers. In order to do that, we observe, reflect, research, and eventually discover laws that explain why things are a certain way. (Itō 2009, 70)

He then goes on to mention Henri Bergson’s interpretation of the concept of *homo faber*, which he translates simply as *tsukuru hito* 作るひと (“the human being who makes [things]”), but actually fails to explain that Bergson’s usage of the term is contextualized within a definition of intelligence as the “faculty to create artificial objects, in particular tools to make tools, and to indefinitely variate its makings” (Bergson 2007). Itō also omits any reference to other understandings of the term, such as Appius’s idea that *homo faber* has the ability to control his destiny as well as his surroundings, or Hannah Arendt’s notion that the *homo faber* (from the builder to the legislator) creates the public world as a realm separated from that of nature, both physically and institutionally. This oversimplification might be justified by various constraints the author had to deal with, but at the same time it consigns his whole *démarche* into the first part of the maxim he mentioned in the introduction: “superficial, wide knowledge”.

According to Itō, the kind of philosophy that the *kōmuin* needed in the past is “philosophy that helps them survive from now on” (2009, 71), i.e. concepts and notions that help them understand the intricacies of the world and provide them with clues on how to act and what decision to make when confronted with problems such as global warming or the proliferation of nuclear weapons, unpleasant consequences of the exacerbation of the spirit of “making things”. However, in the modern world, new problems are becoming increasingly prominent, and therefore the civil servant needs

the tools to assess and decide on issues such as the declining birth-rate, same-sex marriage, or quality of life in an urban environment. According to Itō, these issues are no longer linked to technical expertise, as they represent matters that call for value judgments. Therefore, what the *kōmuin* actually need is the ability to reflect on their own (*mizukara tetsugaku o shi* 自ら哲学をし) on these matters, to make the right choices and to explain these to citizens in words they understand (*jūmin ni wakaruru kotoba* 住民にわかる言葉) (2009, 72).

As can be seen from this fragment, the purpose of the textbook in the author's vision is not to provide information, but to help the reader ask (philosophical) questions as a first step toward developing critical thinking and quick judgment. From this, it can also be inferred that the choice of authors, texts, and concepts reflects this stance, and that its main aim is to create a rather schematic framework that could serve as a guideline for those involved in civil service in Japan. In order to see how this framework functions, in the following sections I will have a closer look at the contents of the textbook, concentrating on the philosophers chosen by the author and on his rationale for his selection.

### 3 . The *kōmuin* and Western philosophy

Chapter 1 of Part 2 includes the following philosophers: Descartes, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ortega y Gasset (in a comparison with Shiba Ryōtarō), Hegel, and Adam Smith.

The section on Descartes focuses on four principles (*gensoku* 原則) inspired by the Cartesian method of hyperbolic doubt: clarity (*meichōsei* 明澄性)<sup>2</sup>, analysis (*bunseki* 分析), synthesis (*sōgōka* 総合化), and enumeration (*maikyo* 枚挙). The explanations of the principles are rather brief, but relatively faithful to the original: leave

aside any prejudice and only judge based on information you know to be true, simplify and break down this information into smaller units, solve the smaller and simpler problems first and then move on to the more complicated, and gather as much information as possible, examine it and make complete lists of further problems (Itō 2009, 72–77). To emphasize the importance of these principles, the author includes a brief example at the end of the chapter:

A certain member of the House of Representatives from the Democratic Party asked the Prime Minister so many questions that he left him speechless. However, his source of information was dubious and he was not able to provide sufficient explanation about its reliability, so he was forced to give up his position and he eventually committed suicide. (2009, 77)

This reference is most likely an allusion to Hisayasu Nagata, who became famous for asking questions without written notes and who fell into disgrace during the Livedoor scandal of 2006, when he falsely accused a top member of the rival Liberal Democratic Party of receiving illegal funds from the founder of the internet company. However, Itō’s manner of referring to this particular episode is biased and misleading to say the least: in his wording, it appears as though Nagata actually took his life *because* of his unpreparedness when, in fact, his behavior in the House and his death are *non sequitur* (cf. Shinoda 2013).

The section on Sartre cites two of the philosopher’s most important ideas: the tenet that “existence precedes essence”, and the notion of “engagement”. The author of the textbook uses these ideas mostly as an argument for his position that “each individual must decide for himself / herself” (2009, 79), but his interpretation of “engagement” is, again, fragmentary and incongruous: he describes existentialist “engagement” as the combination between the desire to be actively involved in society and to do good, and the awareness

of the self-restrictions that this involvement entails (79), which has very little in common with the Sartrean understanding of the term as the process of acknowledging and taking responsibility for one's political actions (Sartre 1948). Furthermore, Itō extrapolates this interpretation to formulate his own definitions of citizenship, which basically state that citizens should participate in, and be in control of, city administration (*toshi keiei* 都市経営), crisis management (*kiki kanri* 危機管理), and political involvement (*seiji sankā* 政治参加). While these definitions seem to draw on Sartre's idea of personal responsibility, they fail to take into account the notion of negative responsibility, as well as the functionalist view put forth by Sartre in his latter essays (especially in the *Critique de la raison dialectique* of 1960), i.e. that human beings — as individuals and as citizens — actualize and materialize the environment they inhabit. In Itō's opinion, the relevance of existentialism in contemporary society is to be found in the fact that it is “a philosophy that stimulates the autonomy and independence of both the government and the citizen” (81).

The next section is dedicated to a comparison between Ortega y Gasset and Shiba Ryōtarō, with a focus on their respective views on the notion of “masses”, or “public” (Itō uses the term *taishū* 大衆). The section starts in fact with a blatant and impardonable misunderstanding of Ortega's philosophy, which is summarized as follows:

In other words, Ortega is an elitist who says that the rule by a dictatorship of the wise is better than the rule of the foolish masses. (2009, 83)

In this synthesis, Itō either deliberately ignores Ortega's actions to oppose the dictatorship in Spain, or deliberately simplifies and twists his interpretation to suit his purpose. For the sake of clarifi-

cation, here is the fragment from Ortega's *The Revolt of the Masses* that Itō is referring to:

Under the species of Syndicalism and Fascism there appears for the first time in Europe a type of man who does not want to give reasons or to be right, but simply shows himself resolved to impose his opinions. This is the new thing; the right not to be reasonable, the "reason of unreason." Here I see the most palpable manifestation of the new mentality of the masses, due to their having decided to rule society without the capacity for doing so. (1932, 73–74)

I believe that this fragment should be understood in the light of Ortega's view on liberalism, i.e. that it is a doctrine which represents the "supreme form of generosity" in the sense that the majority does the paradoxical yet noble gesture of conceding to minorities, thus sharing existence with a weak enemy. Ortega does indeed discuss — and deplore — the conflict between the cultivated, tolerating individual, and the foolish, mediocre masses, but nowhere does he claim that dictatorship is better than democracy.

Then what is the purpose of Itō's misreading? Apparently, it is just to say that even though the notion of democracy is nowadays a "sacrosanct value" (*fukashin no kachi* 不可侵の価値) shared all over the world, it can still be seen as a dangerous idea by some strata of society (85). There is no concrete advice for the aspiring *kōmuin* based on Ortega's philosophy, except perhaps for the suggestion that a plurality of views and opinions is intrinsic to democracy.

As for Shiba Ryōtarō's philosophy, the textbook concentrates mostly on the idea that individuals (*bitobito* ひとびと) are the only ones who have the ability to change the form of government of the country, but only as representatives of themselves, i.e. directly and not through some proxy. The individual is thus defined as an entity that transcends the group or the community to which he / she belongs, and the mechanism that motivates the change is the sense of

crisis that each individual has with respect to the ecosystem he / she inhabits. However, Itō fails again to explain how this vision of the individual is relevant for a civil servant, and he does not provide any information on what particular writing(s) he is referring to.

In the next section, the definition of Hegel's dialectical method is surprisingly accurate — albeit schematic — as a contradictory process between opposing sides which leads to a development of more sophisticated views and ideas as it advances (2009, 87). Itō then goes on to add that the method is often compared to the growth of plants (where the seed is denied by the appearance of the bud, later denied by the appearance of the flower, later denied by the appearance of the fruit etc.) and to a billiards ball, which advances even though it is spinning in the opposite direction. Moreover, perhaps in an attempt to make the method easier to understand for the Japanese reader, Itō proceeds to compare Hegel's method to traditional *haiku* poetry and to Korean TV series. Thus, he cites fragments from poems by Bashō and Buson, claiming that, for example, the serenity created in the first line *furu ike ya* 古池や (“the old pond”) is contradicted and expanded in the following two lines (where the frog jumps in the pond and one can hear the sound of the water) in a manner which is not unlike Hegel's dialectics. Similarly, the fact that dialogues in (some) Korean TV series move the story forward through a succession of oppositions and contradictions creates a sort of antithesis which makes the viewer feel thrilled and liberated (89).

While Itō's attempt to bring Hegel's method into a territory familiar for the Japanese reader is laudable, I find it flawed and deceptive, as he again oversimplifies philosophical notions in a rushed effort to prove they have practical applicability in daily life. As for

the hints that dialectics can provide for the development of society (*shakai no hatten* 社会の発展), Itō suggests that these are refutation, disagreement, contradiction and opposition, and adds that civil servants should use them even if they might make meetings and discussions longer and apparently inefficient.

The last section of this chapter is dedicated to Adam Smith's doctrine of *laissez-faire* (*jiyū hōnin* 自由放任) as put forth in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776. After summarizing Smith's idea that trade and market exchange regulate themselves automatically and channel self-interest toward socially desirable ends, the author briefly mentions the notion of "the invisible hand" as the mechanism that modulates and adjusts the balance of the market. He then moves on to cite Bentham's utilitarianism and the principle of "greatest happiness" — that he also discussed in the introductory chapter — maintaining that it represents an idea that supports and strengthens Smith's "invisible hand" from the standpoint of political theory.

Itō continues his presentation of Smith with a reference to Maynard Keynes' theory of macroeconomics, criticizing the notion of "big government" because of side effects such as inefficiency, increase of costs, useless expenses, and the decline of bureaucrats and civil service. The gist of his argument in this section is that the government should be neither too big as it may become inefficient, nor too small, as this may have unpleasant consequences such as a widening of the gap between the rich and the poor, and the appearance of social categories like the working poor or the so-called *furitā* フリーター (the "job-hopping part-time worker"). Government, the author claims, should keep the balance between these two situations while being flexible enough to intervene swiftly in an emergency situation.

After this excursion into Western philosophy, Itō moves on to discuss Japanese philosophy in the next chapter. He selects five thinkers from different periods and with different backgrounds, whom he introduces in the following order: Watsuji Tetsurō 和辻哲郎, Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉, Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益, Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 and, somewhat surprisingly, the Buddhist monk Shinran 親鸞. I will analyze the way in which these philosophers and their ideas are presented in the second part of this article.

#### 4. Conclusions (Part 1)

As I have shown in this first part of the article, there is a plethora of Western philosophical ideas included in Japanese textbooks for civil servants. However, there are several problems that mar this inclusion:

1) at least in some cases, the author of the textbook fails to justify his choice of authors and selection of philosophical ideas;

2) the author's understanding, and presentation of philosophical concepts oscillates between extremely schematic and blatantly inaccurate or misguided;

3) it is not clear how and to what extent these philosophical ideas are useful for the education of the aspiring *kōmuin* or for the training of the *kōmuin* who are already in service;

4) it is not clear how and to what extent the content of the textbook reflects official guidelines or frameworks put forth by the government or by local authorities.

In the second part of the article, I will continue my analysis concentrating on the inclusion of Japanese philosophers in these textbooks, and I will also discuss in further detail the possible link between incorporating philosophical ideas in such materials and the official image and description of the “ideal *kōmuin*”.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Japanese are mine.

<sup>2</sup> For some reason, Itō chooses the Japanese word *meichōsei* to render Descartes' idea of *clarity*, even though the existing translations prefer the term *meishō* 明証 .

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