

From Descartes and Hegel to Andō Shōeki and Nishida Kitarō: Philosophy in Japanese Textbooks for Civil Servants (Part 2)

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Abstract:

In the first part of this article, I analyzed the way in which Western philosophers such as Descartes, Hegel and Adam Smith are presented in Japanese textbooks for public servants. In the second part, I discuss the rationale behind the selection of Japanese thinkers and analyze the manner in which their ideas are presented. My conclusion is that, even though official documents regarding public servants make no mention of a possible link with philosophical ideas, the aim of the textbook seems to be an attempt to provide aspiring *kōmuin* with an opportunity to reflect on their duties and to improve their critical thinking skills.

In the first part of this article, I started my analysis of the way in which philosophy is incorporated in Japanese textbooks for civil servants (*kōmuin* 公務員) by focusing mainly on the selection of Western authors and on the manner in which their ideas, notions and concepts are presented. I used as an example a textbook called *Kōmuin no kyōkasbo. Shakai hen* 公務員の教科書 社会編 (“Textbook for Civil Servants — Society Edition”), authored by Itō Yukio 伊藤章雄 and published in 2009 by Gyōsei ぎょうせい. The authors I discussed are Descartes, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ortega y Gasset (in a comparison with Shiba Ryōtarō), Hegel, and Adam Smith.

My conclusions were that:

- 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 is 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 continue my analysis of the same textbook concentrating on the Japanese philosophers included in it. I also discuss in further detail the possible link between incorporating philosophical ideas in such textbooks and the official image and description of the “ideal *kōmuin*”.

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 . The *kōmuin* and Japanese philosophy

As I showed in the first part, philosophical ideas are included in the second part of the textbook, titled *Tetsugaku / shisō ben* 哲学・思想編 (“Philosophy / Thought”). Itō selects five Japanese 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 Shinran 親鸞. It might be of interest to note here that the author makes a distinction which, as Maraldo (2013) shows, is quite common: he differentiates between “Western” philosophy (or, Western-style philosophy) and “Japanese” philosophy

by using the terms *tetsugaku* and *shisō*, respectively. However, in most cases this differentiation overlaps with the distinction between premodern and modern — for example, Nishida, a representative of the Kyōto school active in the 20th century, is usually considered to belong to the *tetsugaku* category, whereas Andō Shōeki, an 18th century thinker, is included in the *shisō* category. But for the author of this particular textbook, the distinction between *tetsugaku* and *shisō* seems to be rather “Western” vs. “Japanese” — hence, Nishida and Shōeki are discussed in the same section.

The section on Watsuji Tetsurō is titled, somewhat surprisingly, *Sekinin o aimai ni shigachina nibonjin* 責任を曖昧にしがちな日本人 (“The Japanese people’s tendency to be ambiguous about responsibility”). It begins with a brief analysis of the notion of Nature (*shizen* 自然), in which the author claims that, for Japanese people, since all things in the surrounding environment appear spontaneously (*onozukara* 自ずから), there is no point in opposing or antagonizing them — the only solution is to follow, be obedient and patient, and wait for them to pass. This, in his view, is actually seen as a virtue (*bitoku* 美德):

Following the flow of Nature has always been considered a virtue and in Japan, which has a cultural climate without an absolute deity, this has led to an ambiguity of the concept of responsibility. A country of complete irresponsibility, in which politicians, bureaucrats, the media and companies all fail to take responsibility, can be considered to be a product of historical developments. In order to correct this, we need to brush up our modern conscience. (2009, 99)

In the fragment above, the author uses the term *fūdo* 風土 in the syntagm *bunka fūdo* (“cultural climate”). This is the first reference to Watsuji’s philosophy, and also the first innuendo as to what the link between philosophy and public service might be: Itō seems to

imply that the notion of *fūdo* engendered lack of responsibility, which needs to be overcome by the *kōmuin* through action based on modern principles. He then goes on to cite the three types of climate Watsuji theorized — monsoon, desert and meadow — focusing on the fact that Japan is included in the monsoon type and then commenting that the suddenness (*toppatsusei* 突発性) associated with the monsoon is probably what caused the Japanese people's "hysterical group mentality" that led to violent acts such as ritual suicides (*junsbi* 殉死), the kamikaze squads, and involvement in wars. The section ends abruptly here, without giving any further details about Watsuji's philosophy or about its applicability in the training of public servants.

As was the case with Western philosophers, Itō's understanding — or at least presentation — of Watsuji's ideas is schematic to say the least. Watsuji defines *fūdo* as "a general term for the natural environment of a given land, its climate, its weather, the geological and productive nature of the soil, its topographic and scenic features" (1961, 1), and discusses how this *fūdo* influences us as human beings, both as biological and physiological objects, and as beings engaged in practical activities. However, this definition is nowhere to be found in the textbook, and there is no mention whatsoever of the influence climate can have on our behavior.

I stated above that the title of the section on Watsuji is surprising, and the reason is that, personally, I expected a discussion of Watsuji's theory of ethics (as it appears in his *Rinrigaku*) in a textbook dedicated to teaching (prospective) *kōmuin* how to behave and interact with the public. Itō's demonstration of the connection between *fūdo* and the notion of responsibility is unnatural, incomplete and therefore unconvincing.

The second Japanese thinker included in this section is Fukuzawa

wa Yukichi 福沢諭吉 . The author begins with an overview of the Meiji Restoration when, he claims, Japanese people moved beyond a mentality focused on groups such as the domain (*ban* 藩) and the family to the notion of the independent self which eventually led to the creation of the modern nation-state (*kokumin kokka* 国民国家). This is, most likely, a reference to the principle that Fukuzawa put forth in *An Encouragement of Learning* (1872), that national independence can only be achieved through personal independence. However, the main point of the section is another concept proposed by Fukuzawa, *dokuritsu jison* 独立自尊 (“independence and self-respect”).

After mentioning Sakamoto Ryōma and Saigō Takamori as two of the key persons in the advent of modernity in Japan, the author moves on to discuss Fukuzawa’s philosophy, not before touching upon the one thing these three figures have in common: the stance of keeping their distance from power and remaining critical of the government. Itō synthesizes *dokuritsu jison* as follows:

For Fukuzawa Yukichi, the essence of the spirit is the notion of independence and self-respect, which is informed by the Western modern urbanized society. The independent individual is the one who creates both country and society. The spirit of independence is insufficient in Japanese people, and they also lack logical thinking and practical knowledge. (2009, 102)

The author closes this fragment with the information that Fukuzawa founded Keio University with the motto *dokuritsu jison* and that he placed a lot of importance on disciplines such as economy. This summarization is not wrong per se, but again Itō fails to contextualize it. He continues the section by describing several episodes that allegedly happened to Fukuzawa while he was in the United States and in Europe, only to conclude that his *datsu-a-ron* 脱亜論 (“theory of escape from Asia”) was later used to justify the

Sino–Japanese War.

As readers, we are left with a riddle: what are aspiring public servants supposed to learn from this section? The notion of *dokuritsu jison*, or the idea that they should focus on practicality? Or maybe that philosophical notions can sometimes be used to serve political purposes? The textbook does not offer any answers to this riddle.

The only section in all the chapters dedicated to philosophy where the author indicates a possible lesson for *kōmuin* is the one in which he introduces Andō Shōeki. Titled *Byōdōna seikatsu wa doko made kanō ka* 平等な生活はどこまで可能か (“What are the limits of equality?”), the section starts with a characterization of Shōeki as the only philosopher — from the Heian period up to the Tokugawa period — who pleaded openly for equality and respect among human beings, who argued for the restoration of subjectivity, and who criticized the insatiable greed of the ruling classes. It goes on with several notes on Shōeki’s life and his relationship with the farmers in Hachinohe, most of which are mere suppositions and speculations of the author with little or no ground in the literature — to cite just one example, Itō states that Shōeki was revered like a god (*shingō de matsurareta* 神号で祭られた) by the local community.

Adding to these speculations, the author of the textbook also makes several confusions in his interpretation of Shōeki’s philosophical ideas. For instance, he mentions *chokkō* 直耕 (“straight cultivation”), one of the key concepts in *Shizen shin’eidō*, but he explains it as “directly tilling the land” (*chokusetsu tabata o tagayasu* 直接田畑を耕す), thus ignoring an extremely important dimension of the concept, which is the idea of creativity in its most general sense. As I have shown elsewhere (Paşca 2016), for Shōeki *chokkō*

means much more than just working in the fields, as it points to the principle of “living in accord with the Way of Nature”, which can take on different meanings for different creatures — for human beings, it can even be found in the simple act of making a cup of tea.

The confusion is deepened by Itō’s explanation about the ideal world in Shōeki’s vision:

For Shōeki, the ideal society is the “World of Nature” (*shizensei* 自然世). This designates the situation in which all people turn into farmers, become one with Nature, engage in productive activities, are self-sufficient and live in equality. But in reality farmers were exploited by warriors and merchants. (2009, 107)

While it is true that Shōeki deplored the exploitation of farmers, he never suggested that all people should till the land; his vision is not confined to the realm of agriculture. The interpretation presented here is just an overly diluted understanding of his works, simplified and packaged for easy consumption. But the point of the section is not — as one would expect in this context — the idea that we should strive to live in harmony with Nature. Instead, Itō’s advice for public servants is that they should not hesitate to express themselves and they should speak clearly even when they have a different opinion, just as Shōeki did in an intellectual environment that was not the friendliest: *i o tonaeru koto wa tabū dewa nai* 異を唱えることはタブーではない (“disagreeing is not a taboo”).

The following section is dedicated to Nishida Kitarō and it begins with an explanation of his notion of “pure experience” (*junsui keiken* 純粹經驗):

There is a moment when the self who sees and the self who is seen become one. Nishida calls this moment “pure experience”. For example, when you listen to music intently, you are not aware of your state of mind and you don’t think whether you are feeling good or bad. When you sit on a chair you don’t analyze it and decide on whether it is comfortable or not, just as you don’t analyze whether the condition of the objects in your field of vision is beautiful or not. The situation when, without awareness of the mind,

the objects in front of your eyes become one — this is pure experience. In other words, this is the state of “nothingness” (*mu* 無), when the subjective self and the objective self cannot be separated. (2009, 109)

This is, again, a truncated and watered down version of Nishida’s philosophy, as *junsui keiken* refers not only to the basic intellectual and sensorial experiences to which Itō alludes in this fragment, but to the essential form of reality — for Nishida, “pure experience” lies at the basis of all cognitive activities as it is, in fact, the “one and only reality”. However, the author of the textbook chooses to ignore this dimension of the concept and focuses instead on the idea of the differentiation between the objective self and the subjective one. Thus, he states that, when it comes to human relations, we should always see our own self in the other, as this will trigger the awareness of humanity — hope will appear from the realization that we are all human beings, and hope will eventually lead to understanding.

Even though the author does not mention this clearly, I think it is safe to assume that it is this part that contains the insight for public servants, perhaps in the guise of the idea that one should always be aware of their interlocutor and try to find a way to reach them, in the spirit of Nishida’s “philosophy of peace” (as Itō calls it). This is pure conjecture on my part but, judging from the way Nishida’s philosophy is framed, this seems to be its only practical application in the training of *kōmuin*.

The last section in this chapter deals with Shinran, the 13th century thinker who is considered by some to be the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū sect in Japan. This seems like an odd addition, especially given the fact that the section is titled *Gyōsei sabisu ni hitsuyōna shiten* 行政サービスに必要な視点 (“A point of view necessary in administrative service”), but the author justifies this inclu-

sion by focusing on the notion of *akunin shōki* 悪人正機 (“the evil ones are the right object for Amida’s salvation”), a fundamental concept for the Jōdo Shinshū.

In his view, the term *akunin* (“evil person”, “villain”) should not be understood literally:

But why is it that the evil persons should be saved, and not the good ones? We all expect it to be the other way. [...] The correct answer to this question is surprisingly simple. In fact, the meaning of *akunin* is completely different: they are the unenlightened ones, those who failed to live their lives as they should have, the “losers” (*makegumi* 負け組). They are those who cannot overcome their desires and suffering through their ability and effort alone. (2009, 112)

In other words, Itō explains, in Shinran’s philosophy the term *zenin* 善人 (“good ones”) refers to those who are successful in life, whereas *akunin* refers to those who are most vulnerable in society, and who therefore need help the most. And it is precisely here that the “true spirit” of the public servant comes into play: Itō suggests that the *kōmuin* should not rush to judge people, but instead listen to their stories and try to help them with the openness and kind-heartedness of the Amida who brings salvation to the *akunin*.

This is the last piece of advice extracted from philosophical texts that the author offers for public servants. As I have shown, the philosophers and the texts he chooses are rather eclectic, and his stance seems to be that instead of giving concrete, practical recommendations (“you should do this, you should not to that”) it is better to provide the *kōmuin* with an opportunity for reflection, more along the lines of “when you have a certain problem, think about what this philosopher said”. In the following section, I will explore the way in which these pieces of advice reflect the official guidelines for the conduct of public servants in Japan.

2 . Official guidelines for the *kōmuin*

The most recent official material concerning public servants is a document titled *Heisei 29nendo ni okeru jinji kanri un'ei hōshin ni tsuite* 平成 29 年度における人事管理運営方針について (“Policy concerning the management of human resources in 2017”), adopted by the Abe government on April 12, 2017 and made public by the Office for Human Resources attached to the Cabinet Secretariat. The 17–page document is divided into 10 sections, covering a wide range of topics, from “Management of human resources based on ability and performance” to “Reform of the working style and support for female public servants” and “Responses and measures for an aging society”. Section 6 , titled *Kōki no shukusei to rinri no kōjō* 綱紀の肅正と倫理の向上 (“Enforcing discipline and improvement of ethics”), is the only one specifically dedicated to the conduct and ethics of public servants.

The section contains the following three points:

- 1 . Public servants should constantly be aware of their mission, simplify formalities in order to make administrative procedures more user–friendly, and strive to provide high quality service while being aware of the responsibility that comes with dealing with personal information;
- 2 . Since the trust that the people place in the administration and in public servants is the most important thing, public servants should uphold the law at all times and conduct themselves accordingly. They should not get involved in illegal transactions, and be prudent about what they post on social media;
- 3 . In performing their duty, public servants should always respect the ethics guidelines put forth in various other official documents.

In order to check what these guidelines specify, I dug further into various official documents and came across a set of materials compiled by the National Personnel Authority (*Jinjin* 人事院) as a “Package of teaching materials for *kōmuin* training sessions” which contains, among other things, a series of slides with recommendations on how to behave as a public servant and how to interact with the public. The recommendations range from general, common sense advice such as “you should always be polite” or “you should never forget you are a public servant even when you are off duty”, to very specific rules such as “you are not allowed to accept money or gifts from citizens”, “when you attend a wedding ceremony, you are allowed to receive a gift only if it is within the limits of social etiquette”, “you are not allowed to get involved in market speculations using inside information you acquired as a public servant”, or “you should never play golf or Mahjong and go on trips with citizens you know through work” etc. These are all extremely sensible recommendations and they are, of course, not specific to Japan, as they should represent a set of ironclad rules for public servants everywhere.

What is interesting, however, is that nowhere do these guidelines about public administration refer to any link between philosophy (or other disciplines, for that matter) and the training or conduct of public servants. All the recommendations compiled by the central government are common sensical, general and therefore, to a certain extent, vague — there seems to exist a tacit understanding that these should be further adapted and personalized for (and by) each administrative unit and category of public servants in order to ensure an efficient administration. To cite just one example, the Education Board of Oita Prefecture produced a document titled *Fukumu no kibon* — *kōmuin no kokoro gamae to tokusei* 服務の基

本 — 公務員の心構えと特性 (“Basic duties — Preparedness and characteristics of the public servants”) which contains the following four points: “you should serve everybody, not just one part [of the citizens]”, “listen to the voice of the local community”, “your personal attitude influences trust in all public service” and “the budget necessary for administrative activities is paid for by the citizens through taxes” (2017, *passim*).

3 . Final remarks

If none of the official materials concerning public servants refers to any connexion with philosophy, then what is the purpose of a textbook such as the one compiled by Itō? As I have shown in this article, the sections dedicated to philosophical ideas offer very little — if any — concrete advice on how *kōmuin* should incorporate these ideas into their daily lives and / or professional conduct. What the textbook does seem to try to do is provide (aspiring) public servants with opportunities to reflect on their own on the possible link between philosophical ideas and their duties — in other words, to encourage them to acquire the set of critical thinking skills required when performing a job in which they are the interface between the government and ordinary citizens.

The particular textbook I analyzed here is not officially sanctioned by any administrative body as a recognized document that should be used when preparing for the *kōmuin* examination, which is notoriously difficult in Japan — it represents but a small sample of the whole plethora of textbooks, manuals, reading materials, dictionaries etc. published every year by various authors. As such, it is tributary to the first half of the motto it presents in the introduction: “[your] knowledge should be shallow and wide, and detailed in only one aspect” (*chishiki wa asaku hiroku, hitotsu dake ku-*

washiku 知識は浅く広く、一つだけくわしく) — the knowledge about philosophy it presents is indeed both wide and shallow, fragmented and truncated, superficial and incomplete. Whether such an introduction of philosophical notions is efficient in developing critical thinking skills is something that remains to be seen.

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