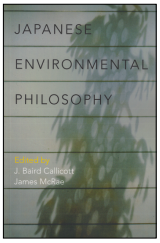

J. Baird Callicott and James McRae, eds., *Japanese Environmental Philosophy*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, paper, 310 pages, €35.00.
ISBN: 978-0190456337.

Philosophizing human-nature entanglements in the face of global environmental challenges through the framework of a single nation is a necessary but contradictory exercise today. A nation-centred narrative runs the risk of falling into a simplified

vision of nationism or even nationalism. It can undermine the visibilities of transnational connectivities and intellectual histories of colonized existences within the nation. Increasingly these often overlooked epistemological insights are brought to attention as a way of nurturing an essential common ground for global concerns. Meantime, nation-states remain powerful as political systems in control of intellectual imagination. The environmental philosophy of a nation in the twenty-first century nevertheless demands a conscious engagement alert to its own perils.

Japanese Environmental Philosophy is a welcome contribution to this emerging subject and indeed the first published anthology to take it up. Its stated goal is to reveal and "invite us to challenge... [foundational] assumptions that have led to the kind of thinking responsible for much of the environmental degradation that we see today."[1] It sets out to do so by gathering fifteen essays with philosophical concerns leaning markedly toward a development of a new ethics—a philosophy of ethics woven out of "Japanese philosophy" that may aid in regulating the ongoing environmental destruction by human beings. In this regard, it is much more than just another collection of the myriad of environmental ideas from Japan's intellectual history.

The five section of the volume frame the new environmental philosophies developed from the Kyoto School, Buddhism, Shintoism, mythologies, and the arts in the terms of the following themes: Nature in the Japanese Tradition of Thought, Human Nature and the Environment, Environmental Aesthetics, Nature and Japanese Culture, and Natural Disasters. The opening essay by Augustin Berque begins by addressing the core intellectual problem of the so-called modern Western paradigm—the "foundational assumption" that the rest of the essays in the publication seems to envisage to challenge by proposing new philosophies, often of ethics, that would undermine such a worldview. The paradigm is based on the Cartesian dualism where nature is perceived as an object, as it has been discussed and clearly defined by Berque and other contemporary scholars today.

In the case of Berque, translingual analyses are the central methodological drive in his proposition of a natural philosophy that overturns such conception. Berque argues eloquently for the possibility of embracing what the Japanese primatologist Imanishi Kinji called "*shizengaku* as naturing science." Unlike *shizen kagaku* or modern science, he posits, this approach hermeneutically embraces the subjectivity and even "culturalness" of non-human majorities. He develops the argument by noting that unlike European languages that are based on a subject-object binary opposition, pre-Meiji Japanese replaced the grammatical subject with a kind

1. "Abstract" *Japanese Environmental Philosophy*, at http://m.oxfordscholarship.com/mobile/view/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190456320.001.0001/acprof–9780190456320

of ambient or a scene. The place of language in the formation of a worldview is extended to his comparative analysis of the notion of *mésologie*, which the physicist Charles Robin dubbed in 1848 the study of *milieu*—the "environment, state of life, social surroundings"—and Jakob von Uexküll's (1864–1944) notion of *Umwelt* or the animal's ambient world, in contrast to the *Umgebung* which is composed of objective data. Uexkül's notion of the study of *milieus* emerged parallel with the Kyoto School philosopher Watsuji Tetsurō's (1889–1960) idea of *fūdo*, which Berque has translated as *médiance.* Berque's essay carefully lays out the case for a *biohermeneutics* that blends epistemologies of Japan and Europe neglected under the shadow of the modern science.

What may need greater attention here and in other essays, however, is the variety of political context within in which philosophies have taken shape at particular times and places. In his afterword "A Plea for Environmental Philosophy as an Extension of Natural Philosophy," one of the editors of the volume, J. Baird Callicott, makes the point brilliantly. In my view, political context is the vital *mésologie* of philosophy in which ideas emerge. Given that this is a book of philosophy and not of intellectual history, a *mésologie* of philosophy may not seem that important. That said, problems arise when the political contexts of intellectual lineages are reduced to the category of "tradition" within particular national and regional frameworks. Indeed, notions like "traditional Japanese thought," "traditional Japanese character and culture," "traditional East Asian understandings," and "only Japanese" are employed by many—though in fairness, not all—of the authors, giving the whole a whiff of Japanese exceptionalism that sets off its approach to the environment as "unique and different" from "Western tradition" or even from the rest of the "East."

First of all, the idea of "tradition" can entail a view of the past invented for present purposes. This often leads to a simplification of historical complexities and a romanticizing of the national past. For example, Takahashi Takao discusses the place of "the characteristics of Japanese thought that appeared in old Japanese myths" in environmental ethics. The remarks that this is based on Shintō ideas is relegated to a footnote. In fact, allusions to Shintō appear frequently in the book as representative of Japan's embrace of the spirituality of nature and the respect shown to it. Not to be forgotten is that Shintō itself has a history of considerable social and political change, including the *Kokka Shintō* of the Meiji period, the cultural consequences of which remain to this day. The adoption of Shintō as the basis for a national ideology with the emperor at its head brought about a neglect of smaller shrines that protected the primeval forests where the *kami* were believed to live, thus closing an eye to various forms of environmental damage. Takahashi summarizes the ontology, epistemology, and morality behind the "old myths" of Shintō and the "ancient people" of Japan, without providing a specific historical context or

even citing particular cases. As a result, the past becomes an abstraction. In Japan, Shintō largely blended with Buddhism prior to *Shinbutsu bunri* or the 1868 Decree on the Separation of Buddhism and Shintō. In other words, the popular rise of the clear-cut Shinto "tradition" we are familiar with today is in part a rather modern invention. Takahashi goes on to argue that "the fundamental relationship between gods and human beings" is one in which "good relationships bring about blessings to humans, whereas bad relationships cause disasters" (pages 233–4). This, too, is an oversimplified assumption of Japanese thought. For instance, right after the Ansei-Edo-earthquake of 1855, the hugely popular *Nishiike* comically portrayed the disaster to be caused by badly behaving catfish—a popular figment of imagination of the time—who needed to be put down by the god of Kashima Daimyō.[2] Although immediately censored by the Tokugawa Shogunate, for which popular culture was viewed as a threat, the philosophy that emerged out of the situation was one of laughter rather than fear of the gods.

Secondly, the notion of a monolithic West standing opposed to the "traditions" of Japan and East Asia needs to be examined carefully when it comes environmental philosophies that aim to refute the intellectual assumptions of modern science whose epistemology, as suggested in the publication, lies behind global environmental degradation. In discussions of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, "the West" is commonly employed as a shorthand for Cartesian dualism which in turn sets up an East-West dualism. In reality, Japan had already embraced an objectified view of nature prior to the dominance of the "Western" environmental worldview.[3] Moreover, the notion of "Asia" had not even existed in Japan and the wider reaches of East Asia until the Jesuits introduced the ideological concept to the country in the seventeenth century. The geographical nomenclature was received by "Asian" intellectuals with disapproval as a sign of the imbalance of power in effect.[4] The study of Japan in the Anglophone world emerged formally as part of Japan's international reaction to Euro-American colonialism. The Asiatic Society of Japan set up by British and American diplomats, businessmen, and missionaries in 1872, five years after the Meiji Ishin, was a precursor to the estab-

2. There is a brilliant display of this cultural and intellectual movement in a permanent collection at the gallery of the National Museum of Nature and Science in Tokyo.

3. For example, see Federico Marion, *The Knowledge of Nature and the Nature of Knowledge in Early Modern Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); and Mateja Kovacic, "Scientific Gaze, Consumer Gaze: Natural History and Commodification of Nature from Snow to Mount Fuji," delivered at a symosium on *Ecologies of Knowledge and Practice: Japanese Studies and Environmental Humanities*, 27 October 2017, St Antony's College, University of Oxford.

4. Urs Matthias Zachmann, "The Meaning of Asia in Japanese-Chinese Relations," inaugural lecture delivered on 28 January 2014 at Old College, University of Edinburgh.

lishment of the academic discipline. In other words, the conceptualization of an environmental philosophy of Japan and East Asia as something opposed to the philosophy of the West is no less a modern project that needs to be challenged at its roots. Not only does such an opposition simplify and idealize the intellectual heritage of Japan in the face of colonization from Western modernity, it tends to obscure Japan's own modern colonialism past and present—for example, vis-à-vis the Ainu people whose environmental philosophies were marginalized at the time. Japanese environmental philosophy in the twenty-first century needs to break free of modern intellectual frameworks that have long defined us under the disguise of seemingly friendly and familiar notions.

It is worth adding a note regarding the background of the present collection. The project was initiated by James McRae, who studied at the University of Hawai'i in the early 2000s (where half of the authors also have an affiliation), and J. Baird Callicott, who was on a fellowship at the Institute of Comparative Philosophy in Honolulu in the mid–1980s. Callicott later published a monograph entitled *A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* in 1994. According to the introduction, Yamauchi Tomosaburō, a philosopher of ethics who arranged for the translation of Callicott's book into Japanese, proposed the preparation of a volume devoted to Japanese environmental philosophy. For his part, Yamauchi was "delighted to realize that Callicott had sketched a Japanese ecological ethic drawing on premodern Japanese philosophy, also confirming his conviction that the integrity, stability, and beauty of premodern Japan were fostered by the traditional Japanese worldview" (page 4). The publication is dedicated to Yamauchi in acknowledgement of his role.

While many of the essays gathered here provide valuable intellectual insights for rethinking ontologies and epistemologies of science, subjectivity, ethics, nature and the supernatural, I find the prevalent assumption of an idealized "Japanese traditional worldview" regrettable. Premodern Japan was no less culpable in its relationship to the environment and its accompanying politics than contemporary Japan. Returning to an idealized past reminiscent of the Meiji Restoration—a betrayal of the meaning of *ishin* 維新: reformation, new progress) in the face of so-called Western modernization is no solution. New progress requires rethinking much of what is too often still taken for granted.

Honda Eiko
DPhil candidate, Faculty of History, University of Oxford