

The Philosophical Scope for “*Ri* [理]” without “*Ratio*”

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Abstract: European terms pertaining to the concept of “ratio” in Latin (rationality or reason) are generally rendered in Japanese as “ri [理]”. This translation appears to be so firmly established that the interchangeability of these terms nowadays is generally accepted without question. This paper will focus on this translation and explore the possibility of its imperfection. This is done through a genealogical examination of early attempts to translate terms pertaining to the idea of ratio into Japanese, such as Nishi Amane’s creation of new words. We reveal the disparity between the two terms and shed light on the extent of the abyss between different philosophical traditions. In order to elucidate this disparity further, this paper will draw attention to two Japanese philosophers of the pre-Meiji era, Ogyū Sorai and Miura Baien. Both are considered rationalistic thinkers in Japan, but the affinity between their philosophical thinking and modern European philosophy paradoxically reveals the complexity of the disjunction between their interpretations of rationality or reason. This not only points to an absence of the concept of ratio in Japanese philosophical discourse but also illuminates differences in the epistemological, ethical, and ontological concerns that underlie that absence. Consequently, a comparative study of ratio and ri leads to the awareness of a philosophical framework that forms conceptions of “principles” that we may take for granted. In this way, this paper aims to exemplify the potential of philosophy to act as a translation in the service of transcultural practice.

1. Introduction

The Latin term *ratio* has great significance in the history of continental philosophy. Since ancient Greek times a form of logical reasoning was seen as necessary for the determination of truth, and the way to guide it was called “*logos* [λόγος]” (definition). The term “*logos*” was later rendered in Latin as “*ratio*”, signifying both “rational principles” as identifiers of truth, and “reason” as the human capacity to capture such principles. The rise of rationalism and scientism magnified the impact

of *ratio* beyond the field of epistemology. It not only promoted scientific discoveries but also redefined human beings as rational beings in which intellect and reason were inherent; intellect discovers rational principles, while reason recognizes moral codes.

There have been various critical reactions to the dominance of rationality as such, for example in the re-evaluation of sensibility in the field of aesthetics and advocacy for the power of the body in Nietzschean philosophy. However, its credentials have grown yet stronger, broadly in accordance with internationalization in the form of westernization. Rational reasoning is central to the establishment of knowledge in academic disciplines. In the face of worldwide ethical problems, rationality or reason plays one of the central roles in discussions of ethics internationally. The significance of *ratio* permeates both society and individual life, as the basis of our pursuit of knowledge and moral behavior. *Ratio* has become deeply engrained in our mindset.¹

Should it be a matter of course to presuppose the universal value of *ratio* in our current global society? Or, is there still some room left for self-criticism of this mindset, not as a reaction — as it is still grounded in a dualistic view between the rational and the irrational — but as an encounter with a different thought structure? If that were even possible, such a discovery would allow us to undergo a radical transformation of mentality precisely because of the extent of *ratio*'s permeation of our mind. And it is attention to the act of translation that could trigger such a transformation, and which this paper attempts to draw.

European words pertaining to the concept of *ratio* are generally translated into Japanese using the term “*ri* [理]”, which is often used to signify “rational principles” or “rationality”. As well as the permeation of the concept, its translation is now almost automatized as though it were instinctively accepted. This paper does not propose an objection to this automatization. What matters is whether it

¹ In the preface of the research project entitled “Problems of Rationality”, Yamada Kei'ichi construes rationality as a precondition of any kind of explanation or understanding. He argues that the fundamentality of this concept makes a philosophical discussion difficult, as an explanation of rationality inevitably presupposes rationality in itself. Although the term “rationality” is used in its broadest sense in this preface, his claim shares with this essay the problem of consciousness. See Yamada Kei'ichi [山田 圭一], “Kantōgen: Yamada Kei'ichi hen ‘gōrisei no shomondai’ [卷頭言: 山田圭一編『合理性の諸問題』] (Preface: ‘Problems of Rationality’)”, in *Chiba Daigaku Daigakuin Jinbun Shakai Kenkyū Purojekuto Hōkokusho* [千葉大学大学院人文社会科学研究所研究プロジェクト報告書] (*Chiba University Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project Reports*) 312 (2017): at: <http://opac.ll.chiba-u.jp/da/curator/103384/>.

suppresses the possibility of encountering an alternative way of thinking about knowledge, the existence of human beings and our surroundings. In order to explore this question, the pioneering translators of these terms merit some reflection. When put under the spotlight, the clarity of the concept of rationality is immediately thrown into question. To put it more precisely, the terms “*ratio*” and “*ri*” are revealed to be non-interchangeable, as will be discussed shortly.² This helps us to rediscover a philosophical framework that shapes our thought patterns and prompts us to recognize an alternative schema. This recognition gives us the potential to transcend the boundaries of our mentality and envisage a more comprehensive and flexible approach to considering epistemic and ethical themes. An analysis of the philosophical abyss between *ratio* and *ri* exemplifies such potential.

2. Linkage

In the history of Japanese literature, probably the oldest recorded translation of *ratio* into *ri* dates back to the *Latin-Portuguese-Japanese Dictionary* published in Amakusa in 1595 — known as the oldest dictionary of European languages and Japanese in existence. This dictionary had an entry “*ratio*” in Latin, in which the word was translated as the compound noun “*dōri* [道理]” — a combination of “the way” (*dō* [道]) and “principle” (*ri* [理]). It is noteworthy that “*dōri* [道理]” was used here rather than the single “*ri*”, but what is important here is establishing such an early encounter with the term *ri*. The *Japanese-Portuguese Dictionary* published in Nagasaki in 1603 also contained the entry “*ri/cotouari*”, which was rendered as the

² As a relevant topic to this essay, the untranslatability of the term *ri* (*li* in Chinese) into English has been debated in English-language literature, especially from the viewpoint of the comparative study of European and Chinese philosophy. For example, Jana S. Rošker considered that the ancient Greek term *logos* might be the closest to the meaning of what *li* is referring to, but she also stated that the term *logos* cannot cover the entire semantic scope of the term *li*. She proposed an idea of seeing the term *li* as a concept of a dynamic, relational and all-encompassing structure. See Jana S. Rošker, “Structuralism and its Chinese ancestors: Traditional Chinese perception theories and the concept of structure (*li*)”, *Anali PAZU HD* 1, no.2 (2015): 137–138. Brook Ziporyn also noted the problem of translating *li* into English using the existing philosophical lexicon, including “reason”, “*logos*” and “principle”. He offers ample explications about the history of the concept of *li* in Chinese philosophy, which led him to interpreting *li* as “a harmonious coherence, which, when a human being becomes harmoniously coherent with it, leads to further harmonious coherence”. See Brook Ziporyn, “Form, principle, pattern or coherence? *Li* in Chinese philosophy”, *Philosophy Compass* 3, no.3 (2008): 403, 415.

Portuguese “*rezão*” (*ratio*).³ Here, *ri* and *ratio* were clearly seen as interchangeable. Furthermore, the Spanish Dominican, Father Diego Collado, published a *Latin-Spanish-Japanese Dictionary* written in Rome in 1632, in which the Latin term “*ratio*” was also spelled in Roman letters as “*ri*”.⁴ Thus, as can be seen from the above, translations in the Christian missionary era confirm that the meanings of *ratio* and *ri* were perceived to be similar from the time of the very first translation of the term.

The reflexive interchange between *ratio* and *ri* was reinforced during the Meiji restoration, firstly by Tsuda Mamichi (1829–1903) and Nishi Amane (1829–1897).⁵ Both studied Western thought at Leiden University together and used their knowledge of Europe to build a new political and social system in Japan. Tsuda’s *Theory of Human Nature* (*Seiri-ron* [性理論]), which is assumed to have been written around 1861, includes a brief afterword contributed by Nishi in which Nishi considered Tsuda’s quest for “human nature” (*seiri* [性理]) to be equivalent to what was called “philosophy” (*kitetsugaku* [希哲学]) in the West (NAZ1: 13).⁶ Nishi’s attempt to draw an association between Tsuda’s essay on humanity and philosophy was controversial.⁷ However, when his essay, *Tengaidokugo* [天外独語] and his

³ Doi Tadao [土井 忠生], *Nippo jisho: vocabylario da Lingoa de Iapam* [日葡辞書] (*Japanese-Portuguese Dictionary*), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1960), 417. “*Ri*” is “*on’yomi* [音読み]”, or the Chinese reading of the kanji “理”, while “*cotouari* (its current Romanization is *kotowari*)” is “*kun’yomi* [訓読み]” or the Japanese reading of this character. The term “*cotouari*” was also rendered as “事分り” (understanding things) or “言分り” (understanding statement) in archaic Japanese.

⁴ Diego Collado and Ōtsuka Takanobu [大塚 高信], *Koryado Nihon bunten* [コリヤード 日本文典] (*Grammar of the Japanese Language*), Reprinted (Tokyo: Kazama Shobō, 1966), 111.

⁵ In this paper pre-Meiji Japanese thinkers are referred to by their first name, and Meiji and post-Meiji Japanese thinkers by their surname. This is the customary way of referring to Japanese writers.

⁶ The word “*kitetsugaku*” written here is famously known as the progenitor of the current translation of “philosophy”, namely “*tetsugaku* [哲学]”, which was also coined by Nishi in his later works. In this essay, references to Nishi Amane’s works adopt the pagination of the *Nishi Amane Zenshū* edited by Ōkubo Toshiaki. This edition is designated by “NAZ”, plus the volume and page number.

⁷ Lin argues that Nishi could not understand the peculiarity of the idea of knowledge developed through the history of philosophy, and arguably lumped together the study of *ri* with philosophy. He claims that Nishi adopted the idea of knowledge based on positivistic empiricism and utilitarianism. See Lin Měi mào [林 美茂], “Tetsugaku ka, soretomo rigaku ka: Nishi Amane no philosophy gainen no hon’yaku mondai wo megutte [哲学か、それとも理学か : 西周の philosophy 概念の翻訳問題をめぐって] (Philosophy or

article “*Kaika wo susumuru hōhō wo ronzu* [開化ヲ進ル方法ヲ論ズ]” are taken into consideration, it is possible to show that Tsuda applied the term *ri* to the concept of “the rational principle” as used in physics in Western science. In those writings, as Maeda argues, astronomy, physics, chemistry, medicine, economics, and philosophy in Western academia were introduced as subjects pursuing apodictic *ri*, based on proofs and demonstration.⁸ This shows the influence of ideas of truth in Western science on his use of the term “*ri*”. That is to say, the term “*ri*” was used to signify provable and demonstrable principles in the service of determining truths in academic disciplines. Thus, it is apparent that the deliberate approximation of *ratio* with *ri* had already begun with the dawn of the Meiji restoration.

Nishi played a more decisive role in translating *ratio* into *ri* in Japanese. This he achieved through his frequent use of the term “*ri*” as a suffix or prefix when translating numerous terms from European academic terminology. For example, the English term “psychology” was first translated as “*seiri-gaku* [性理学]” whose literal meaning is “a study of human nature” (NAZ1: 31), and later modified to “*shinri-gaku* [心理学]” whose literal meaning is “a study of the principle of *kokoro*”; George Berkeley’s concept of “reason” as a faculty of cognition through the intellectual inference of things perceived⁹ was rendered as “*ri-sei*”, which compounds “*ri*” with “*sei* [性]” (innate quality) (NAZ1: 32)¹⁰; Francis Bacon’s

Neo-Confucianism: On Nishi Amane’s Translating ‘Philosophy’), *Asian Cultural Studies* 39 (2013): 232.

⁸ Maeda Tsutomu [前田 勉], “Tsuda Mamichi no shoki shisō (jinbun, shakaigaku hen)[津田真道の初期思想(人文・社会学編)] (The Early Thoughts of Tsuda Mamichi)”, *Bulletin of Aichi University of Education* 56 (2007): 53–55.

⁹ George Berkeley, “A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge,” in *The Works of George Berkeley . . . To Which Are Added, an Account of His Life and Several of His Letters to Thomas Prior, Esq., Dean Gervais, Mr. Pope, &C.*, also by Lewis Bingley Wynne, and Joseph Stock (London: Printed for T. Tegg and son, [etc., etc.], 1837), 11: “It remains therefore that if we have any knowledge at all of external things, it must be by reason, inferring their existence from what is immediately perceived by sense”.

¹⁰ The term “*sei* [性]” has three meanings in Nishi’s philosophical anthropology. First, it means the physical or physiological nature of human beings; second, it means the innate psychological nature of human beings; and third, it means the *a posteriori* psychological nature of human beings. When “reason” was rendered as “*risei*,” the meaning of the term “*sei*” belonged to the second category. To define “*sei*” as “innate nature” may be seen as being derived from Ogyū Sorai’s understanding of “*sei*” as the inherent nature of things. For details about the link between Nishi and Sorai in terms of their understanding of the concept of “*sei*”, see Koizumi Takashi [小泉 仰], “‘Hyakuichishinron’ ni okeru Nishi Amane no ningensei-ron to Ogyū Sorai [『百一新論』における西周の人間性論と荻生徂徠] (Nishi

concept of “truth” as sound knowledge through observation and experiment¹¹ was expressed as “*shin-ri*”, which comprises “*shin* [真]” (true) and “*ri*”; and the word “physics” was translated as “*butsuri-gaku* [物理学]”, which literally means the study of the principle of matters — in contrast with metaphysics “*chōri-gaku* [超理学]”, whose meaning can be interpreted as the study of the principle which is beyond the principle of the existence of matters (NAZ1: 34, 42). These usages of the term *ri* recur throughout Nishi’s translations of scientific and philosophical terms.

As a result, many of them have become commonplace in current Japanese. Importantly, a translation of the word “principle” was also coined by Nishi and rendered as “*genri* [原理]” ([元理] in his original writings), which consists of “*gen* [原 or 元]” (source, origin) and “*ri*” (NAZ1: 169, 460). According to Takano Shigeo’s linguistic research, it appears that the term “*genri*” had become the definitive translation of “principle” by 1912.¹² Consequently the term “*ri*” was widely applied to the concept of scientific, physical and rational principles, and through this the linguistic interchange between *ri* and *ratio* became established.

3. Disjunction

Recognizing Nishi’s significant contribution to the current Japanese language raises the question of whether the words already in existence during his time were insufficient for translations of *ratio*, and that is why he saw the need to create new terms. In fact, there were several acknowledgements of the imperfection of this translation. In earlier times, Portuguese Jesuit priest João Rodriguez wrote in *Arte da*

Amane’s Theory of Human Nature in the ‘Hyakuichishinron’), *Philosophy* 55 (1970): 76–82.

¹¹ Francis Bacon, “The New Organon”, in *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. John M. Robertson (Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2013), 60: “. . . the truth is that the knowledge of simple natures well examined and defined is as light: it gives entrance to all the secrets of nature’s workshop, and virtually includes and draws after it whole bands and troops of works, and opens to us the sources of the noblest axioms”; *ibid.*, 76: “. . . first of all we must prepare a natural and experimental history, sufficient and good; and this is the foundation of all, for we are not to imagine or suppose, but to discover, what nature does or may be made to do”.

¹² Takano Shigeo [高野 繁男], *Kindaikango no kenkyū: Nihongo no zōgohō • yakugohō* [近代漢語の研究 : 日本語の造語法・訳語法] (*Research into Modern Words of Chinese Origin: Methods of Creation and Translation in Japanese*) (Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 2004), 73. In this book Takano conducts a detailed analysis of the stems of new words created in the Meiji era in the service of importing Western philosophy and science.

Lingoa de Japam in 1604 that the Latin word “*rationalitas*” (rationality) to describe the faculty of judgment generally could not be found in the Japanese language.¹³ His brief remark provides no further explanation. However, it alludes to the absence of some aspect of the concept of *ratio* and suggests that a philosophical disparity between *ratio* and *ri* might be explored.

One thinker who played a more decisive role in questioning this disparity was Nishi, who actually solidified the translation. In his *Shōhaku sakki* [尚白箭記] (An unaccomplished man’s reading notes), Nishi cautioned that the term “*ri*” was not completely interchangeable in every European language (NAZ1: 168).¹⁴ This caution should not be overlooked, as it draws attention to the conceptual disjunction between *ratio* and *ri*. In other words, despite its current permeation the translation of *ratio* into *ri* could be seen as imperfect. If so, how might these two concepts conflict with each other? In order to examine this point further, it is important to examine Nishi’s reflection on this translation.

Nishi’s attention to the imperfection of this translation is based on his view that the customary use of the term *ri* applied to two concepts in modern European thought: the laws of nature and reason (NAZ1: 169). Referring to scientific discoveries such as Newton’s law of gravity, Nishi focused on the objectivity of natural scientific knowledge, stating that, “...even if the law is discovered by human beings, it is different from *ri* which is determined with the aid of the mind’s imagination. The law of nature belongs to the realm of objectivity” (NAZ1: 169).¹⁵ His argument here corresponds to the argument of the objectivity of *ratio* in the realm of physical nature in modern European philosophy. According to a rationalistic account of true knowledge, even if a proposition was considered to be true by everybody, it would be seen as necessary but insufficient. As Descartes emphasized, the realm of the existence of the object is separate from the realm of the

¹³ João Rodriguez, *Nihon daibunten* [日本大文典] (*The Art of the Japanese Language*), trans. Doi Tadao [土井 忠夫] (Tokyo: Sanseidō, 1955), 643.

¹⁴ For details of Nishi’s understanding of the concept of “*ri*”, especially the influence of Confucian thought, refer to Inoue Atsushi [井上 厚史], “Nishi Amane to Jyukyōshisō — ‘*ri*’ no kaishaku wo megutte [西周と儒教思想—「理」の解釈をめぐって]” (Nishi Amane and Confucian thought — on an Interpretation of “*ri*”) in *Nishi Amane to Nihon no kindai* [西周と日本の近代] (*Nishi Amane and Japanese Modernity*), ed. by Shimane Kenritsu Daigaku Nishi Amane Kenkyūkai [島根県立大学西周研究会] (Tokyo: Perikan sha, 2005) 146–182. See also Tomoe Nakamura, “Nishi Amane’s Response to European Dualism”, *Postgraduate Journal of Aesthetics* 10, no. 3 (2013): 30.

¹⁵ Author’s translation.

subject who perceives it.¹⁶ True knowledge, then, belongs to the former. When Kantian epistemology distinguished knowledge from opinion and belief, objective sufficiency became paramount.¹⁷ It has been argued by scholars that the discovery of and emphasis on subjectivity in this context made the translation of this term difficult in the Meiji era.¹⁸

Curiously the current translation of “objectivity” into Japanese, namely “*kyakkan* [客観]” (“客観” in old characters), was used by Nishi for the first time as a counterword to denote the European concept of “objectivity” (NAZ1: 169). Furthermore, with his affinity for Auguste Comte’s positivism, Nishi promoted the introduction of scientific methodology in academia in Japan. This suggests that Nishi’s notion of objectivity signifies more than a mere explanation of the concept. More importantly, Nishi may be seen as one of the first Japanese thinkers who re-conceptualized true knowledge by using the concept of *ratio*, which entails objectivity, and explained this delineation of truth in Japanese using the term “*ri*”.

In this way he clearly distinguished the law of nature from that of humanity. Faced with translating the term “reason” into Japanese, he argued that the word could mean the human faculty to judge right and wrong, and called it “*risei* [理性]” (NAZ1: 169). He further pointed out that the term “reason” also signified the grounds for such judgment. Importantly, he considered that reason as the grounds for judgment could not be completely objectifiable. Rather, he thought that it was “...nothing other than that which is determined by the human mind” (NAZ1: 169).¹⁹ That is to say, while he defined the law of nature using the concept of objectivity,

¹⁶ Rene Descartes: “They [corporeal objects] are not perhaps exactly such as we perceive by the senses, in many instances, very obscure and confused; but it is at least necessary to admit that all which I clearly and distinctly conceive as in them, ...really exists external to me” (AT VII 80). The brackets are inserted by the author. For Descartes’ works, the *Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch have been followed. Citations of Descartes’ works take their pagination from the modern standard edition of the original Latin and French, *Oeuvres de Descartes*, translated and edited by Charles Adam and Paul Tannery. This edition is designated by “AT” plus the volume and page number.

¹⁷ Slavko Splichal succinctly highlighted this point in his *Principles of Publicity and Press Freedom* (Lanham; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), 99. For a detailed definition of truth in Kantian epistemology, see Kant’s argument about *a priori* knowledge in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (AK3:B740–747).

¹⁸ There are rich arguments on this point in the literature on this subject. For example, see Kobayashi Toshiaki [小林 敏明], ‘*Shutai*’ no yukue [「主体」のゆくえ : 日本近代思想史への一視角] (*The Evolution of “Subject”*) (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 2010).

¹⁹ Author’s translation.

Nishi thought that reason was more closely associated with the realm of the human mind. Since one of his fields of specialty lay in the natural law theories, it might be assumed that his thinking here pertains to the distinction between the natural scientific law and the moral law that modern European philosophers dealt with; judgment of correctness in science was thought to be qualitatively different from judgment of justice in moral practice. The former is based on the law of nature as “*physis* [φύσις]” — the realm of causal necessity — while the latter is derived from the human mind as “*nous* [νοῦς]” — the realm of freedom. Nishi did not refer to the concept of freedom. Instead, he used the idea of “imagination” or “human mind” and attempted to clarify the necessity of distinguishing the law of nature from that of humanity. Accordingly, human capacity to realize these two different principles was also divided; human faculty, “intellect” (*Verstand*), which deals with knowledge was distinguished from “reason” (*Vernunft*) (“practical reason” in particular), which deals with morality. Nishi’s translation “*risei*” as reason applies exclusively to the latter.²⁰

This is where the untranslatability of the term *ri* that Nishi referred to comes in. It is because, despite the intrinsic difference between the law of nature and that of humanity which he saw in European thought, Nishi believed that the term *ri* was traditionally used to include both. For example, in view of his criticism of neo-Confucianism, which he thought equated the principle of heaven with that of human beings and thus advocated consonance between natural disasters and human politics, he claimed that in some theories of *ri* there was no clear separation at play between the principle of nature and that of humanity (NAZ1: 170). This claim carries the implication that the “*ri*” of nature only subsists in this cosmos and that the “*ri*” of human nature is identically contained in the principle of nature. The dualism between nature and humanity disappears in this sense because the former is determinably inclusive of the latter. This idea of *ri* was therefore seen as incompatible with the concept of *ratio*, which entails a dualistic view that separates nature (*physis*) from mind (*nous*).²¹ In other words, Nishi’s caution concerning the non-interchangeability of *ratio* with *ri* was based on his belief that traditional Japanese and Chinese thought often combined both the intellectual and moral

²⁰ In his *Chisetsu* [知説], Nishi clearly differentiated “*risei* [理性]” (reason) from “*gosei* [悟性]” (understanding) (NAZ1: 464).

²¹ For details of Nishi’s perceptions of European dualism and the way in which he attempted to reconcile it, refer to Nakamura, “Nishi Amane’s Response to European Dualism”, 24–35.

spheres. Consequently, the concept of reason as an independent faculty for judging what is right or wrong did not exist in these traditions. This implication is compatible with the claim made by the Portuguese Jesuit at the beginning of the seventeenth century: that the word “rationality” was absent from the Japanese language. It was important for Nishi to emphasize the independent realm of reason in European philosophy; otherwise it would have been misleading to apply the term “*ri*” to the translation of the word “reason”.

Consequently, going back to the idea of *ri* as rational principle, if the law of nature and the law of human beings were originally seen as identical in theories of “*ri*”, the principle that supports this identity had to be essentially distinguished from the principle based on *ratio*. Moreover, if *ri* was thought to be the principle that covered both nature and human beings, then such a principle should be based on a different ontology. Nishi did not explicate this issue further. He merely pointed out that there were fine classifications in philosophical terminology regarding the concept of reason or rationality in European philosophy, while the term *ri* could be too inclusive and ambiguous in Japanese. However, by virtue of Nishi’s awareness and struggle with translation, it has become possible to expect that traditional ideas of “*ri*” might undercut the interchangeability of *ri* and *ratio*. This expectation will be examined shortly through an analysis of two Japanese philosophers in the pre-Meiji era: Ogyū Sorai (1666–1728) and Miura Baien (1723–1789), whose rationalistic ideas about knowledge paradoxically illuminated a philosophical disjunction between the two concepts.

4. *Ri* without *ratio*

One of the prominent philosophical works that helps us to explore the philosophical proximity and distance between *ratio* and *ri* is Confucius scholar Ogyū Sorai’s *Benmei* [弁明] (*Distinguishing the Names*). In this book Sorai defined “*ri*” as the principle of “discerning something” (NM16: 194; JT 296), although whether a “thing” is discerned logically or experientially is not clearly spelled out.²² It is at

²² The English translation of *Benmei* appears in Sorai Ogyū’s, *Ogyū Sorai’s Philosophical Masterworks: The Bendō and Benmei, (Asian Interactions and Comparisons)*, trans. John A. Tucker (Honolulu: Association for Asian Studies, University of Hawaii Press, 2006). Hereafter the reference to this version is designated as JT plus page number. Also inserted is the reference of the citation to a Japanese version, which appears in *Ogyū Sorai. Nihon no*

least possible to point out that his concept of “*ri*” may be partly construed as a logical principle used in arithmetic — for instance, in addition the principle of equations is identified with *ri* (NM16: 163; JT 212). The universality of a mathematical formula is consistent with Sorai’s assumption that *ri* is a single principle that “...all affairs and things naturally have” (JT 295). This shows that Sorai considered *ri* to be a universally applicable principle. In this context, the concept of “*ri*” has affinity with the meaning of *ratio* as the grounds for true knowledge. Here, “*ri*” can be rendered as “a rational principle”, as used in the English translation of *Benmei*.

However, the fact that Sorai did not differentiate experiential discernibility from logical discernibility in his definition of “*ri*” is no trivial matter. This is because it prevents his argument about *ri* from separating the purely objective principle from principles of behavior. Immediately following his discussion of the permeation of the single principle in all affairs and things, Sorai also stated: “Whoever wants to do good indeed will see *ri* for what they should do and will do it. Whoever wants to do evil also will see *ri* for what they should do and will do it” (JT 295–96).²³ Here the concept of “*ri*” belongs to behavioral principles. And since he conceded that codes of behavior may vary according to self-interest, *ri* inevitably involves relativity. Precisely because of this relativity, he concluded that “the principles offer no fixed standards” (NM16: 192; JT 296). This is incompatible with moral theories in modern European philosophy, where morality requires goodness for the sake of goodness rather than for the sake of own interest, and thus its principle can be universalized. This conception accords with the attribution of moral judgment to the realm of reason rather than sensory perception. At this point, the connotation of *ri* radically moves away from *ratio* as the universalizable principle in the rationalistic sense. Thus, translating Sorai’s term “*ri*” to “rational principles” entails an element of disparity.

However, this does not mean that Sorai did not seek the universal principle of moral code. Indeed he did seek to overcome the relativity of the behavioral code. To attain such knowledge was in fact one of the central topics in his writings. The point is that Sorai could not develop a universal principle as such using the concept of *ri*, because he saw the relativity of *ri* in human behavior as one of the essential

meicho 16 [荻生徂徠 日本の名著 16] (*Great Books of Japan* 16), (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1974). This version is designated as NM 16 plus page number.

²³ Tucker’s version translates “*ri*” as “the rational principles” in this passage. However, in order to highlight the philosophical disjunction between *ratio* and *ri*, the original term “*ri*” is left as it is in this quotation.

characteristics of humanity. In order to develop an ultimate principle that would override this relativity, a different idea was called for. This was the technique of the sages; that is, “the way” (*dō* [道] - *dao* or *tao* in Chinese).

Sorai introduced the concept of “sages”, taken from the Confucian *Analects*, and explained them in the following manner:

There is nowhere that the rational principles [*ri*] do not penetrate. Yet what people perceive of principles differs according to their human nature...[T]here are differences in perception of principles. Therefore, if we do not plumb all the principles, we will be unable to grasp the unity of things. Yet how can anyone possibly plumb all principles below heaven? Only the sages were capable of exhausting our human natures. Able to exhaust the human natures of people and able to exhaust the nature of things, the sages matched their virtues with those of heaven and earth. For these reasons, only the sages had the ability to exhaust all principles and found the ultimate standards. (NM16: 192; JT 296)²⁴

Under the title of “sages”, this passage offers a concept of the ideal status of human beings: he or she must be able to act upon the principles of both knowledge and “virtue” (*toku* [徳] — *de* [德] in Chinese). The concept of *toku* that appears in Sorai’s definition of sages is specifically associated with “humanness” (*jin* [仁] — *ren* in Chinese) and was expected to be reflected through behaviour (NM16: 144). In this context, *toku* can be interpreted as a virtuous skill that makes it possible to harmonize the principle of “the nature of things” with that of “human nature”. In order to reach the wisdom of this harmonization, it was seen as being necessary to go beyond *ri*.

In this way, Sorai delineated ultimate wisdom as knowledge of “the way”, or “*dō* [道]” to bring peace by means of the synthesis of knowledge and *toku*. As a result, the relativity of “*ri*” was seen to be overcome. This conception implies that Sorai believed the quintessence of an object to be determined by “ought to be” rather than “is”. This is different from the European epistemological tradition, which places strong emphasis on the pursuit of “is” by means of purely logical reasoning.²⁵

²⁴ The brackets are inserted by the author.

²⁵ This trait may go back as far as the time of the Ancient Greeks. For example, Parmenides proposed “the truth” [ἀλήθεια] (*aletheia*) as being that which is thinkable and utterable without violating the law of contradiction, and saw the necessity of *logos* to lead the truth. See his *Fragment 1: 29–30* and *Fragment 2: 3–6*. Plato made a firm distinction between

The revelation of “ought-to-be” in Sorai’s context is not attributed to the power of reason as a faculty of judgment but to *toku*, which is conceptually closer to the faculty of feeling. On top of this, it was considered that *dō* manifests itself via behaviour rather than comprehension (NM16: 144). This is why he construed *dō* as a “technique” (“*jutsu* [術]”) of the sages. Consequently, there was no need for Sorai to prioritize or manipulate *ratio* in order to define ethics or knowledge, because the significance of *ri* was ultimately absorbed by the notion of *dō*.

Miura Baien’s philosophy also provides an interesting test case of the proximity and disjunction between *ratio* and *ri* in pre-Meiji era thought. As a result of his interest in Dutch studies, Baien’s epistemology in one sense reflects a natural scientific account of knowledge. He tested experimental texts such as *Anatomische Tabellen* and took an interest in astronomy developed by Tycho Brahe and Copernicus. More importantly, his epistemology potentially approaches the idea of “true knowledge” as “*res veritas*” (true thing) in modern European thinking: what is demonstrable by showing the internal nexus between objective realities. First, Baien attributed the locus of truth about an object to the object itself — borrowing his terminology, “heaven-and-earth”.²⁶ He aimed to avoid the subjective identification of truth and pursued true knowledge, which “heaven-and earth” alone reveals. In this sense, Baien’s epistemology of “the principle” or “*ri*” in Japanese signifies a principle that inheres within objects. He called such a principle “*jyō-ri* [条理]”, applying the meaning of “*jō*” as in branch of a tree and “*ri*” as in grain of the wood.²⁷ As far as his pursuit of principle in the realm of object is concerned, the

logical reasoning and sensory perception and prioritized the former in the attainment of truth. Aristotle took a different position, according to his conceptions of “practical wisdom” [φρόνησις] (*phronesis*). However, his definition of “truth” (*aletheia*) is based on the identification of intrinsic unity between subject and predicate which is an outcome of logical reasoning. See his *Metaphysics* (1027b20; 1030a1). David Lynn Hall and Roger T. Ames overviewed the history of *logocentrism* in European philosophy and stated that “...no serious cracks appeared in the well-nigh monolithic culture of rationality until the nineteenth century”. See David Lynn Hall and Roger T. Ames, “Rationality, Correlativity, and The Language of Process”, *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy New Series* 5, no. 2 (1991): 85–86.

²⁶ Miura Baien, *Deep Words: Miura Baien’s System of Natural Philosophy*, trans. Rosemary Mercer (Leiden & New York: E.J. Brill, 1991), 186: “...to understand heaven-and-earth we must follow heaven-and-earth as it is, without attributing our ideas to it, there is no teacher to equal heaven-and-earth”.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 160–161. According to Mercer’s description of Baien’s philosophical wording, he sometimes combines two Chinese characters in a new way in order to reconfigure the traditional usage of the term. His invented terms include “*jōri*” *ibid.*, 8.

concept of *jiōri* has some affinity with that of *ratio* as grounds for truth in the realm of objective realities.

In order to discover the *jiōri*, Baien proposed the following three processes: “discarding habits of thought, following the correct signs, and seeing opposites as one”.²⁸ The first two processes can be related to a rationalistic process of knowing. To be more specific, the discard of habitual thought reinforces a liberation from unquestioning obedience to what was believed to be true. Baien pointed out the need to test the accuracy of the habitual thoughts through experiments intended to distinguish “correct signs” from “wrong signs”. Although his discussion pays little attention to the difference between induction and deduction, it calls for at least a demonstrable attestation of knowledge. This fact also reveals that his epistemology presupposes the existence of a human capacity for judgment that makes reasoning demonstrable, although this was not one of his main concerns. Such a capacity in Latin is called *ratio* (or reason in English). Therefore, it can be said that Baien’s conception of *jiōri* is supported by his presumption of the existence of *ratio* as intellectual reasoning to attest truth demonstrably. It can also be stated that the grounds for this demonstrability can be attributed to the discovery of a principle that is inherent in objective realities. Up to this point his delineation of the concept of “*ri*” has affinity with what rationalists envisaged as *ratio*.

However, when it comes to the ultimate process of knowing, or “seeing opposites as one” (*hankan gōitsu* [反觀合一]), Baien’s approach to natural science was never welded to rationalistic or empirical epistemology. This marks an irreconcilable gap between *ratio* and Baien’s delineation of the concept of *ri*. His ontological statement runs as follows:

[*Jiōri* signifies that one possesses two, and two open one. When there are two, their distinctness reveals *jiōri*, when there is one, the two merge and no seams are visible. Seeing opposites as one is the art of discovering things in this way.²⁹

Importantly this dialectic model of cognitive process is based on Baien’s claim about heaven-and-earth as a single totality that entails the following dual modality: “heaven” as incorporeal entity and “earth” as corporeal entity. His general interpretation of an object in his *Gengo* [玄語] follows this principle. The existential

²⁸ Ibid., 160.

²⁹ Ibid., 161. The bracket is inserted by the author.

form of incorporeal entity was called “*ki* [氣]” (*qi* or *ch’i* in Chinese), which originally meant “breath” or “air” and was often rendered as “force”.³⁰ By contrast, the existential form of the corporeal entity was called “*tai* [体]” (body). The unity between *ki* and *tai* was construed as the essence of existence. This recalls the mind and matter dualism of European philosophy. However, while the dualism explains the unity between them as the constitution of an individual entity, the relationship between *ki* and *tai* that Baien delineated requires the involvement of the surroundings of an object. He stated:

Object [*mono*] has nature and nature is endowed with object. Nature and object merge without seams. Thus they are one whole. Nature pairs with body, object pairs with *ki*. Nature and object stand distinct, this is *jōri*. Thus they are two sides. Nature is nature alongside object, object is object alongside nature. Therefore one is one and one, and one and one is one.³¹

This passage indicates that Baien considered a single object referred to as matter (*mono* [物]) to consist of both corporeal and incorporeal space coexisting alongside each other. That is to say, an object could be regarded as a single entity only through connecting its material space with its immaterial environmental space. Existentially divisible unity between these two kinds of space was thought to be the essence of existence. Here Baien’s ontology may be interpreted as an example of substantializing space. In this context there is no void space. Incorporeal space is substantialized as a living plenum that receives the potential to be embodied from corporeal matter and also supplies living force, or “*ki*”, to matter so that mere matter can become the “*tai*” (body) of life. This is consistent with the fact that Baien stated not only that “one is one and one” but also added “one and one is one”, and suggested that each object is united one with another based on the ceaseless unity between incorporeal living force and corporeal life.³² The chain of this nexus of objects ultimately encompassed what he called “heaven-and-earth” as a whole.

³⁰ For an explanation of the word “*ki*”, see the introduction to *Deep Words* written by Mercer, *ibid.*, 8.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 78. The bracket is inserted by the author.

³² *Ibid.*: “By parting, two stand distinct, by combining, two merge into one. If one were simply one there would be neither separation nor combination, and if two were simply two, there would be no division or contrast. One and two are not simply one and two. Stability entails severalty, and being entails wholeness. By division, one is parted, by contrast, two are combined. Division is the warp, contrast is the woof. Warp and woof are parted spontaneously by *jōri*”.

Baien’s ontology does not support the idea of a purely individual object, only the totality of this single cosmos. It is not a static unity but an organic unification through a motif of biotic terms such as “*ki*” and “*tai*”. The principle that supports this ontology is what Baien called *gyōri*.

At this point, the gap between *ratio* and *ri* in Baien’s inquiries into truth does not only suggest a different definition of the principle of this universe; it also strongly pertains to how to think about an individual object. The difference between the concept of *mono* (thing) in Baien’s ontology and “a thing perceived” defined as “representation” (*repraesentatio*) in modern European philosophy now becomes apparent. Representation is conceptually separate from an object, let alone an object itself. According to the Cartesian definition, an object is determined through an extraction of “clear-distinct” perception from “things perceived” in general. At this point an object becomes that which is determinable in accordance with *ratio*. In a strict rationalistic sense, what is determinable in this way is qualified as real existence. By contrast, according to Baien’s epistemology “object” signifies a relational being that entails recognition of not only representation but also non-representation. Empty space that gives neither stimulation to senses nor meanings to intellectual understanding is supposedly substantialized as the meaningful plenum. *Mono* (a thing/object) does not directly signify “a thing perceived”. It includes its surroundings and thus avoids being individually perceived. It contains not only its material surroundings but also its spatial surroundings. The nexus of the continuous linkage between them constitutes a whole entity, that is, cosmos as life. It is incompatible with the idea of *ratio*, that is, unchangeable, static, universal principles that are applied to explain the logic of “things perceived”. Knowing “*mono*” in Baien’s philosophy presupposes a perception of non-representation. The principle, or “*ri*” is thought to permeate this ontological system. Consequently, *ri* is established without *ratio*.

5. Conclusion

The genealogical study of the use of the term *ri* in translation reveals the disparity between the concept of *ratio* and that of *ri*. This is despite the conceptual approximation prevalent in the current use of these terms. This disparity does not just indicate the absence of the concept of *ratio* in Japanese traditional thought. As can be seen from both Sorai’s and Baien’s epistemological concerns, there has been

some interest in rational principles that might be perceived as being similar to the quest for *ratio* in European philosophy. However, their usage of the term *ri* illuminates a philosophical abyss between *ratio* and *ri*. This is due to their delineation of truth and/or morality without the need to use the concept of *ratio*. Elucidation of this disjunction involves epistemological, ethical and ontological exploration.

In Sorai's case, the concept of *ri* was far removed from that of *ratio*; he considered the essence of human beings to entail relativity concerning their reasoning in behaviors and regarded it as the apodictic principle or "*ri*" of human nature. Therefore, more importance was placed on "ought-to-be" than "is" in the service of peace in the community as a whole. Accordingly, "the way" or *dō* preceded *ri* in its significance. *Dō* is defined as the synthesis of knowledge and "virtue" or *toku*. Since the locus of *dō* lies in practice rather than pure observation, rationalization of moral principles using reason was not a central issue for Sorai. Consequently, he developed a moral philosophy without the concept of *ratio*. As far as Baien's philosophy is concerned, despite his valuation of rational reasoning his epistemology was never welded to the concept of *ratio* in European philosophy. His biotic dualism between "*ki*" (breath, force) and "*tai*" (body) was deduced from his understanding of this cosmos as a vital totality. This idea entails the view that there is no void space; emptiness is substantialized. This is irreconcilable with the view that this universe consists of the nexus of each individual and there is a static and apodictic principle that underlies this relation on which the concept of *ratio* stands. In this way, the philosophical disjunctions between *ratio* and *ri* as shown above give us the opportunity to elucidate a philosophical framework of epistemological, ethical and ontological questions in different cultural traditions.

Drawing attention to the imperfection of the translation does not necessarily need to foster negative criticism. Rather, as Nishi's struggle with translation shows, it can invoke a reconsideration of the basis of philosophical schema that we may be unaware of otherwise. This pertains to what James W. Heisig called "thick translation", which "...begins where dictionaries and reference works reach their limits" and aims to "...express the content" of the original" in the service of a de-privatization of philosophical thought.³³ Heisig's conception of "thick translation" suggests the difficulty and necessity of making dialogue possible bearing a plurality of traditions in mind. Such an attempt goes beyond a description of a cultural history

³³ James W. Heisig, "East Asian Philosophy and the Case against Perfect Translations", *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 2.1 (2010): 86.

and leads to “transcultural” practice.³⁴ In advocating philosophy as translation, Saito Naoko also states that it will wake us up to a hidden dimension of our thinking, and give us a means of transforming our mode of thinking and mindset from within through our re-engagement with language.³⁵ As this essay has attempted to exemplify, a re-examination of the translation between *ratio* and *ri* has the potential for such a transformation.

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³⁴ The idea of transcultural practice is based on Wolfgang Welsch’s idea of transculturality. He stated that, “The concept of transculturality aims for a multi-meshed and inclusive, not separatist and exclusive, understanding of culture. It intends a culture and society whose pragmatic feats exist not in delimitation, but in the ability to link and undergo transition. In meeting with other lifeforms there are always not only divergences but opportunities to link up, and these can be developed and extended so that a common lifeform is fashioned which includes even reserves which hadn’t earlier seemed capable of being linked in. Extensions of this type represent a pressing task today”. See Wolfgang Welsch, “Transculturality — The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today”. *Spaces of Culture: City, Nation, World* (1999): 194–213.

³⁵ Naoko Saito, “Philosophy as Translation and Understanding Other Cultures: Becoming a Global Citizen through Higher Education”, *Educational Studies in Japan* 9 (2015): 25.

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