

Philosophical Significance of the Premodern Intellectual Heritage

Latin American / Japanese Philosophy as World Philosophy

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In Latin America and Japan, there were already highly developed intellectual traditions before modernization began. The Aztec, Maya, and Inca, the great pre-Hispanic civilizations of the Americas, possessed deep knowledge of astronomy, architecture, medicine, and administration. The intellectuals and sages in these civilizations engaged in inquiries into the nature of the world, humanity, divinity, and morality among others. Likewise, the premodern society of Japan was host to a range of intellectual schools, developed from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Kokugaku. The scholars of these groups studied and discussed a wide range of topics, including nature, humanity, and morality.

Can we call any part of these premodern intellectual heritages philosophies? This question is of great importance especially in relation to the possibilities of world philosophy in these regions. That is, the heritage of premodern traditions is a major factor that can separate these regions from the West. If these regions are to be determined to have their own version of philosophy, the key to this consists in relating premodern heritage to the philosophy imported from the West and modern philosophy.

Latin American philosophy offers interesting material in relation to Japanese scholarship. In Japan, the premodern intellectual heritage is usually called Japanese thought, using this moderate term in preference to the heavily charged and controversial 'philosophy'. By contrast, Latin American philosophers explicitly debate whether there was a philosophy in the Americas before the Spanish conquest. The debate is still ongoing, but the main arguments all seem to have been already presented.

Some scholars assert that philosophy cannot be allowed to be monopolized by the West but is found in intellectual traditions in different regions. For example, Garcilaso de la Vega, a 16th-century Peruvian half-indigenous writer on the Inca empire, described indigenous sages as philosophers. In the 20th century, the Mexican historiographer Miguel León Portilla affirmed the existence of a Nahuatl philosophy in the Aztec tradition. In the 21st century, other Mexican and Peruvian philosophers have worked to reconstruct Nahuatl philosophy, Maya philosophy and Andean philosophy from the pre-Hispanic era.

According to these researchers, philosophy is possible almost everywhere, even places that have never encountered the West, although it may take the form of myth, religious belief, or poetry. Those who restrict philosophy to the Western tradition are called euro-centric who practice intellectual colonialism. Although most Latin American countries became politically independent in the 19th century, their economic and cultural dependence on the Western countries continues even to the present. The liberation of philosophy from the West could contribute to intellectual independence and freedom of thought.

This position has been criticized by many philosophers. Some scholars deny the existence of premodern philosophy, affirming that philosophy as such refers to the intellectual activity begun in ancient Greece and developed throughout Europe. Others state that philosophy should not be confused with myths, religious beliefs, or poetry. Instead, rationality, logical argument, and objectivity are indispensable features of philosophy, which did not exist in the premodern tradition. Others warn that the affirmation of premodern philosophy can be motivated by unphilosophical reasons, such as nationalism or the reaction of an injured cultural identity. Liberation from dependence is not a philosophical but a political, economic, or social issue.

However, if philosophy did not exist in the premodern era, does this mean that non-Western regions cannot have their own philosophy and can only study the Western philosophy? Some scholars detach philosophy from regionality on the grounds that philosophy is universal. Are there ways to integrate premodern intellectual traditions with current philosophical activities? What is the philosophical significance of premodern intellectual heritage?

Different regions and differing natures of their premodern traditions will provide different answers to this question. Philosophers in each region must provide their own answers. Western philosophy cannot solve this problem because this is a peculiar issue related to marginality of philosophy and discontinuity between the premodern and the modern. Here, a comparison among non-Western regions can be helpful. In our globalizing world, we can see different regions have different premodern civilizations, sharing a similar cultural and geo-political position in the modern world.

The people of Latin American, especially those of the above-mentioned great premodern civilizations, offer a good reference cases to Japanese scholars. Their premodern heritages are unique and differ starkly from Japanese heritages. However, contemporary philosophers in both regions speak in a similar way of creating their own philosophy as part of world philosophy. A reflection on the relationship between premodern heritages and current philosophy is indispensable to achieving this task.

In the session, two scholars from Peru and Mexico will present introductions to this topic from the perspectives in relation to their regions. Mario Mejía Huamán, a native Quechua speaker, provides a conception of Andean philosophy rooted on traditions and circumstances, without insisting on the existence of a premodern philosophy. Adalberto de Hoyos investigates the world-views of the Zapotec people of Mexico to widen the current horizon of philosophy. As part of a comparison with the Japanese circumstances, Yosuke Bando will investigate the possibility of applying the introduced cases to Japanese philosophy.

The key issues will be how premodern script texts were developed, how the process of colonization and Christianization affected to native people, how diverse the different ethnic groups in a nation are, how philosophy scholars continue premodern traditions, and others.