



Simon Ebersolt, *Contingence et communauté*. Kuki Shūzō, philosophe Japonais

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Without trying to settle the question of the various possible meanings of a non-Western philosophy, Simon Ebersolt proposes to immerse himself directly into the concrete case of the Japanese philosopher, Kuki Shūzō 九鬼周造 (1888–1941), whose thinking was constructed through an ongoing dialogue with thinkers of Europe and of Japan, centering principally around the concept of contingency (偶然性, the contingency in the meeting between people, between events, between words in a poetic rhyme, and so forth). He pursues his investigation by triangulating between the dimensions of the individual, the universal, and the particular (occasionally identified with the national). This approach has proved to be particularly significant for other twentieth-century Japanese thinkers like Watsuji and Tanabe.

Ebersolt stresses Kuki's position between different particular communities (both philosophic and cultural). In Europe, he was in close dialogue with Bergson, Sartre, Heidegger, and Husserl, and in 1928 he gave a talk at the famous *Décade de Pontigny*. In Japan, he was recommended early on by Nishida Kitarō for a post at the University of Kyoto and during the 1930s published his principal works: *The Structure of Iki*, his writings on poetry, his various reflections on Time, and the *Problem of Contingency*. Largely forgotten after the war, he was rediscovered in the 1980s. As the only Japanese philosopher praised directly by Heidegger in *On the Way to Language*, he has become the subject of a considerable secondary literature, both in Japan and abroad, a body of writings that Ebersolt comments on and complements with the first complete monograph on the entire Kuki corpus.

In Kuki's writings we see both his rational and his sensual sides, setting up a ten-

sion between the metaphysical (his logic of identity) and the phenomenological (his examination of ideas like “given concreteness,” ethnicity, the esthetic of rhyme, encounter, and contingency). Kuki’s ambition is to articulate these two aspects, most notably in his *Propos sur le temps*, written in French. In it he seeks to establish—emblematically but also problematically—the interface of a vertical level of “metaphysical-mystical extasis” (the temporality of the eternal recurrence of the same with its reversibility of the identical) and a horizontal level of “ontologico-phenomenological extasis” (the three modes of the irreversibility in Heidegger’s notion of time). Following the evolution of the philosopher, Ebersolt endeavors to explore the consequences of this tension between the phenomenological and the metaphysical.

In an early work, *Bergson au Japon* (1928, also written in French), Kuki recalls that after an anti-metaphysical period influenced by Anglo-American utilitarianism and Auguste Comte’s positivism, Japan went through a period of German idealism (ever more neo-Kantian in nature), encouraged by the sympathy of the government for the Prussian political model. Kuki was educated in this context before departing around 1910 for Europe, where the wave of Bergsonian thought led him to discover the dimension of metaphysical intuition. Some poems he composed during this period, while ironic about neo-Kantian universalism, rejoice at the sense of “hecceity” peculiar to Bergson’s stress on existential and concrete reality, a notion that Kuki was later to develop with the help of phenomenology. He considered phenomenology an extension of Bergsonian thought through intuitive givenness and the abolition of Kantian distinction between matter (sensibility) and form (understanding): the object is not constructed by the subject, but is given in lived experience (intentionality or being-in-the-world).

After returning to Japan, Kuki began his most productive period. According to Ebersolt, the point of convergence in most of his writings is the grasp of given concreteness as a “we,” which seems to entail the extension of Marxist stress on the communal to a world of ideas theretofore characterized by the “I.” Kuki endeavors to develop and conceptualize a philosophy of “reality” (实在), of the bodily as it is lived in the present. This is particularly the case in *The Structure of Iki* (1930) in which he sets out a clear description of the living encounter between two individuals—a “we”—and elaborate a hermeneutic (not an eidetic) of the ethnic being of the Japanese. This grounds his attempt to “understand” it factually as a remarkable self-manifestation of its mode of being. In turn, he sees the “we” as ethnic (the cultural and linguistic specificity of the Japanese people) and as dual (the tension of intersubjectivity in a relationship not of love but of unconsummated seduction between a man and a woman). This gives us something closer to Aristotelian phronesis than to Kantian legalism, that is to say, a concrete ethic of coexistence (of

the “I” with a “thou” and their shared “between”), which has its own freedom and spatio-temporality and at the same time reflects his writings on time. Kuki’s ethic is close to Watsuji’s interrelational *aidagara* (間柄), demonstrating the same critique of the Heideggerian existential analytic for its lack of social spatiality, and yet different insofar as it develops a relation that is more inter-subjective and individualistic than social and daily. And finally, in contrast to Kuki, who seems to present Iki (いき、行き、生き、粋) as an ethnic specificity of the Japanese, Ebersolt tries to underline its universal character as something “common” to people of diverse cultures.

Kuki’s major work, on contingency, was published in 1935. Unlike some commentators who have suggested that Kuki is not interested in contingency as a supposed prerogative of Japanese thought and language but rather sought to grasp what is concretely given to us in life, something that lies within the capacity of every individual. Whereas philosophy tends to draw us away from life and towards abstraction and set up to strong a separation between subject and object, Kuki aims at a concreteness that draws us closer to life, arguing that this is precisely what happens with contingency, whose factuality cannot be subsumed under the universal, the conceptual and the rational, as in the neo-Kantian mode. The crucial element here, in an Aristotelian way, is the accidental relation with the subject, and an individuality along the lines of Heraclitean becoming. Under the influence of phenomenology he regards it better to locate contingency in the “self-giveness of intuition.” Nevertheless, whereas Husserl viewed contingency as a “naïve” register of a natural attitude, incapable of seeing the *eidos* of a thing, Kuki stressed the way in which “the phenomenon phenomenizes itself.” In a Heideggerian mode, he draws attention to the spontaneous character of the phenomenon as something “that shows itself in itself” rather than as a construct of transcendental consciousness. Moreover, he regards it as a sort of *epochè* that allows us to grasp a phenomenon as non-necessary (that is, as contingent), and arouses in us a sense of wonder that interrupts the supposed necessity of natural order. In conclusion, Ebersolt writes, “Kuki has radicalized phenomenological reduction...: encounter as contingency is the privileged phenomenon of phenomenology, i.e., phenomenality itself” (pp. 162–3). Kuki’s contingency, not unlike Watsuji’s “climate,” appears to be a radicalization of Heidegger’s “thrownness.”

Be it “logical” (categorical, in the subject-predicate relation), “empirical” (hypothetical, in the relation between principal and consequence), or “metaphysical” (disjunctive, in the relation between the whole and its parts), the central meaning of contingency lies in encounter (邂逅), both within the phenomenal event of appearing and within the event of meeting, proper to sociality (and prior to any ethnic community, which is an ossification of contingent “being together”).

Ebersolt goes on to argue that Kuki’s phenomenological intention gets carried

away by a metaphysical logic of identity. As a result, contingency is transformed into destiny, wherein the meeting of contingent reality is experienced as a potential finality that one is obliged to actualize in some future praxis. Thus, even while acknowledging contingency, one transforms it into a destiny that one accepts in an act of *amor fati*. Here we see a non-phenomenological decision to eternalize the fragility of the contingent, a decision based on a logic of the principle of identity as expressed in the ideas of a “necessary-contingent” (the original contingent metaphysically absolutized), and of an eternal return of the same (each moment of the absolute necessary being both a beginning and an end).

If Kuki’s discourse on the phenomenology of encounter is convincing, the attempt to link to it a speculative-existential logic of identity seems problematic, convoluted, ambiguous, and thereby solidifying the common into an ethnic nationalism. Despite the efforts of the author to give coherence to the whole of Kuki’s thought, I do not find it in the end totally convincing.

This study, reinforced by a mastery of the Japanese language, is remarkable for its attempt to present a comprehensive account of Kuki’s work, integrating tensions and contradictions, taking into account secondary literature as well as the intellectual and political context. What makes it difficult to read is the author’s chronological approach of presenting Kuki’s themes in the order in which they appear and then reappear, leaving us occasionally feeling confused at the effort to be both complete and delicately nuanced.

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