

1 Questioning the Basic Nature of Human Beings: ‘Where Have We Come from? What Are We? Where Are We Going?’

Masakatsu Fujita

Modern society is facing a broad array of problems, including the destruction of the environment, issues related to natural resources and energy, problems concerning population and food supply and wars and tension between states or ethnic groups. Human Survivability Studies (HSS) is a field of inquiry that addresses these difficult problems in which many factors are entangled, and, looking at them from a comprehensive, macro-perspective, brings together various disciplines in pursuit of solutions.

This field of inquiry is called *seizongaku* (survivability studies) in Japanese and Human Survivability Studies in English, but it is not the survival of individual human beings that is being examined; what is being addressed here is the survival of society, the survival of humanity as a whole and the survival of the environment, or the planet, itself.

Further, it is not simply ‘survival’ or ‘continuing to exist’ that is at issue; this field of inquiry will remain devoid of a core philosophy or set of ideas if we do not clarify the forms in which this notion is to be pursued. To put it another way, HSS forms a single discipline by forecasting the direction we are headed in, or, in other words, by taking on the task of describing how society, humanity and the planet ought to be in the future. This field obtains its foundations as a discipline by both seeking solutions to difficult problems from a technical perspective and also mapping out a vision for the future. This book constitutes an attempt to meet this challenge, and in this chapter I begin by demonstrating that the question ‘Where are we headed?’ is a fundamental topic of inquiry for all human beings.

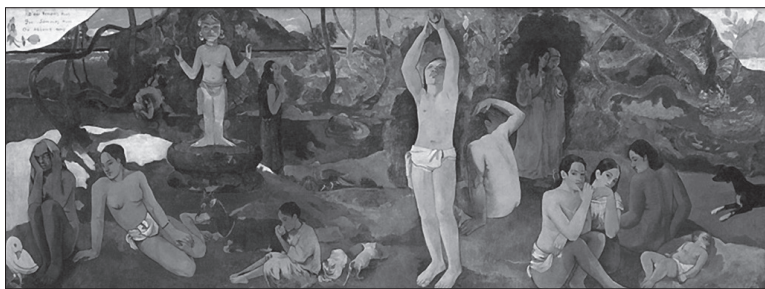


Figure 1.1: Paul Gauguin, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (1897–1898)

When I think about ‘where we are headed’ in relation to survival, what immediately comes to mind is a work the French artist Paul Gauguin painted in Tahiti called *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?* (Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going?).

It was painted during his stay in Tahiti from 1897 to 1898, but it appears to be a depiction of Gauguin’s internal world. Starting from the viewer’s right-hand side, first there is subject matter symbolizing the beginning of life (a depiction of an infant), next there is an image that symbolizes youth and the prime of life and finally an elderly person on the verge of death is portrayed. These correspond to the three questions in the painting’s title: Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going?

Of course, Gauguin was not the first to pose these questions – they have presumably been asked since humanity took its first steps towards self-awareness. The following passage is found in the gospel of John (8:14): ‘Jesus answered, “Even if I do bear witness about myself, my testimony is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going”’.

Kamo no Chōmei’s (1155–1216) well known *Hōjōki* (An account of my hut) (1212) raises the same questions in its opening passage:

A river’s flow is ceaseless, and yet its water is never the same. The foam that froths in its eddies disappears and bubbles up, and does not remain fixed there forever. ...Dying in the morning and being born

in the evening, [we are] just like the foam on the river. [We] do not know, people who are born and die, where they have come from and where they are going. (Kamo no Chōmei 1957)

Here the answer presented to the question of where people have come from and where they are going is simply ‘we do not know’. This perspective makes the sense of transience that runs throughout the entire work even more profound.

In philosophy, too, these questions have been taken up again and again since ancient times as essential topics of inquiry. Pascal (1623–1662) poses them in his *Pensées*. In a lecture included in *L'Énergie spirituelle* (1919), Henri Bergson (1859–1941), one of the leading French philosophers of the twentieth century, asks precisely the same questions as Gauguin: ‘Where have we come from? What are we? Where are we going?’ (Bergson 1959: 815) (Bergson no doubt had Gauguin’s painting in mind). Bergson asserts that while systematic philosophy does not always directly engage with these questions, they are what ‘is perplexing, disquieting, and fascinating for most men’. He goes so far as to say that if philosophy cannot answer these questions, it is not worth an hour’s effort.

‘What are we?’ Life and death

In the end, the questions illustrated by Gauguin can each be said to be asking, ‘What is a human being?’ They are also asking about the meaning of ‘life’. As Bergson says, however, these are perplexing, disquieting questions, and it is not at all easy to come up with clear answers. The fact that they have been asked so relentlessly over the centuries is another indication of this.

I cannot fully answer the question ‘What is a human being?’ but there are two points I would make here. One is that we find ourselves in a situation into which we have been placed through no intention of our own, having been ‘thrown’ here as something that exists in a particular state of being, and we have no choice but to accept and deal with this fact. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), a leading German philosopher, described this state of affairs with the term *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) (Heidegger 1972: 135). At the same time, however, we are also entities that pursue our own potential within this situation and the limitations and conditions it imposes on us. We transcend our present selves in an ongoing process of self-creation.

This *Entwurf* (projection), to use Heidegger's term, is something that inherently belongs to human beings.

I would now like to consider the human trait of always being placed within a fixed set of circumstances. This amounts to simply thinking about what 'life' is, but with that which imposes a limit on 'life' as a clue to how we should proceed. In other words, the meaning of 'life' is brought into relief in the light of death as that which limits human existence.

Of course, we cannot talk about what 'death' itself is. In the *Apology*, Socrates says that death is something we do not know much about and cannot meaningfully discuss. Socrates had been put on trial and sentenced to death for seducing and corrupting the youth of Athens in his daily discussions with them ('rejecting the gods of the *polis* and believing in a species of *daimon*' was also given as a reason for his sentence). When Socrates was offered a chance to be freed on the condition that he would cease his discussions with the youth, an activity that to him was entirely the search for truth, or, in other words, 'to love and pursue wisdom' (φιλοσοφεῖν (*philosophēin*)), he refused, saying that if he accepted such terms out of fear of his own death it would amount to a rejection of his own way of living – 'to love and pursue wisdom' whatever the consequences. He then told the people gathered for his trial that there was no need to 'fear death' because we do not know the first thing about it.

We are indeed ignorant about what 'death' is. We do know, however, that our lives are limited by it. We know that we are surrounded by a darkness, the nature of which we cannot grasp directly, and that the business of being alive is carried out within this framework.

Miki Kiyoshi (1897–1945) uses the term 'void' to express the situation of human life in such circumstances, that is, finitude or the fundamental condition of being unable to avoid death. In 'Ningen no jyōken ni tsuite' (On the human condition), an essay from his *Jinseiron nōto* (Notes on a philosophy of life), he writes, 'The more I try to focus myself, the more I feel I am floating above something. Above what? It can only be the void. My self is a point in the void' (1966: 254). A human being is like a tiny boat floating on the limitless sea of 'the void'. Miki believed it is this 'void' surrounding human beings that is the human condition, and if we ignore our relationship to it we will never be able to understand what we are.

Transience

Death, for us, is a darkness the nature of which we cannot grasp directly. This abyss whose bottom we cannot see causes us great anxiety. Since ancient times, people have faced the anxiety created by the ephemerality of existence and sought to express it. This sense of the transience of life can perhaps be described as the central theme that runs through the art, literature and religion of Japan.

One lucid interpretation of how people have faced death and transience is given by Karaki Junzō (1904–1980). Karaki is known as a literary critic, but he studied under Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) and also wrote books on philosophy, such as *Miki Kiyoshi* (1947). In *Mujō* (Transience), a book published in 1965, after discussing the state of mind or emotion of ‘ephemerality’ displayed in classical Japanese women’s literature, such as *Kagerō Nikki* (The mayfly diary) (ca. 975), *Genji Monogatari* (The tale of Genji) (ca. 1008) and *Izumi Shikibu Nikki* (The diary of Izumi Shikibu) (ca. 1008), and the ‘pathos of transience’ and ‘awe-inspiring sense of transience’ reflected in masculine emotions that appear in the works of male writers like Hōnen (1133–1212), Shinran (1173–1263), Yoshida Kenkō (ca. 1283–1352) and Bashō (1644–1694), Karaki focuses in particular on the ‘metaphysics of transience’ found in Dōgen (1200–1253).

Karaki thus distinguishes two kinds of ‘transience’ in this text. One is a ‘sense of transience’ that has been grasped as objects of ‘mind’, ‘emotion’ or ‘awe’, while the other is ‘transience itself, a “metaphysics of transience” that gets right to the reality of things’ (Karaki 1964: 352). This illustrates how death and transience have been addressed in two ways within the history of Japanese thought and literature. One approach has been to mourn the ephemerality of existence, observe one’s own mind in the midst of dealing with this sorrow and carefully set down these observations in words, while the other has been to seek a way to live that cuts through the ephemerality or emptiness of existence without becoming drunk on one’s own emotions. Karaki finds the latter approach in the thought of Dōgen.

The chapter entitled ‘Shōji’ (Life and death) in Dōgen’s *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the true dharma eye), for example, contains the following passage:

This life-death is the life of the Buddha. To loathe it or throw it away is to lose the life of the Buddha. To remain attached to life-death, too, is to lose the life of the Buddha, to stop the way of being of the Buddha in its tracks. Only when you neither hate nor love do you enter the mind of the Buddha. ...when you release and forget your own body and mind, throw them into the home of the Buddha, and follow what is done from the direction of the Buddha without applying your own force or using your own mind, you separate from life-death and become the Buddha. Should any person become stuck in his or her own mind? (Dōgen 1993: 468)

Dōgen is telling us to discard our grasping minds and avoid becoming attached to life-death. Here we are being told to walk down an entirely different path from a state of being in which we become intoxicated by a self that has been filled with feelings of ‘ephemerality’. It is not that Dōgen never speaks about ‘transience’. In another chapter of *Shōbōgenzō* (Treasury of the true dharma eye) entitled ‘Dōshin’ (Mind of the way), for example, he says, ‘Turning our mind to transience, surely we should not forget the ephemerality of the world, and the precariousness of human lives’ (Dōgen 1993: 471). But we are not being told this in order to lament this transience. On the contrary, it is precisely because the world is ephemeral that we are told to discard our attachment-prone mind and immediately separate ourselves from life-death. To do so, Dōgen believed, was to become a Buddha.

Returning to the question ‘What are we?’ or ‘What is “life”?’ the answer must surely be deeply connected to how we face the ‘death’ that imposes a limit on our lives. There is no single answer; various approaches can be taken. What can be said is that in contrast to Kamo no Chōmei’s simple ‘we don’t know’ in response to the question ‘Where have people who are born and die come from, and where do they go?’, Dōgen offers a clear answer to the question of where the tiny boat floating above the endless sea of ‘the void’ has come from and where it is going.

Existence

I have made two points above in relation to the question ‘What are we?’. I’ve stated that on the one hand we have been thrown into a particular situation through no intention of our own, and have no

choice but to accept and deal with it. At the same time, however, we are an entity that pursues its own potential within this situation; we are an entity that chooses its own state of being, and, going beyond its current state of being, is constantly creating itself. In what follows I consider this latter aspect of our being.

Here I draw on the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), a philosopher whose existentialist ideas exerted a powerful influence on post-war thought. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre distinguishes between the existence of things and the existence of human beings. Things are simply there, their existence nothing more than just being, while human beings, always aware of themselves, choose their own futures, make decisions and create themselves. In other words, human beings not only *are* in the manner of things, but *'exist'*. We throw ourselves into the future. Sartre borrows Heidegger's term *Entwurf* (projection) to describe this state of being of human beings. This *Entwurf* is our starting point, and there is nothing before it. Sartre expresses this as follows.

Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism. (Sartre 2007: 22).

With the phrase 'existence precedes essence', Sartre also expresses this idea that human beings, rather than possessing a fixed essence in advance and being determined by it, are entities that create themselves through their own decisions. This means that human beings are radically 'free'. The standards that justify our actions do not exist in advance outside of ourselves. We justify ourselves. But this means we take responsibility for everything. Our actions affect not only ourselves but also the people around us as well as society in its entirety. My choices 'bind' society and humanity as a whole.

As a result, I am responsible not only for myself but for other people and the entire human race. Because the choices I make are my own choices and not orders given by someone else, I must take full responsibility for them. And since everything starts with my own choices and decisions, I cannot escape this freedom and responsibility. Sartre expresses this as humanity having been

‘condemned to freedom’. To run from this burden, and the anxiety it causes me, is to deceive, abandon and deny myself. We must accept the sentence we have been given.

Consideration for future generations

Returning to the question ‘What is a human being?’, a human being is an entity that freely decides and creates its future. But the choices human beings make are always tied to responsibility. In what form are we to bear this responsibility? This question is fundamentally connected to the ‘where’ of ‘where are we going?’. Dōgen’s answer describes a ‘where’ for oneself, but if one’s actions are connected to every other person and ‘bind’ their manner of being, then the relationship between this ‘where’ and other people must also be examined.

In the past, ethics have taken as their object only other people who are right in front of us, or other people who are living in the same era. Even in cases in which people who will live in the future have been considered, ethical questions have been debated on the assumption that what is good for people in the present must be good for people in the future as well.

It cannot be denied, however, that issues related to ethics have undergone massive changes in the modern era. Our scientific and technological development has radically altered the circumstances in which we find ourselves; our activities no longer influence only the people around us, but, as can be seen in the case of global warming caused by the emission of greenhouse gasses, can affect the Earth as a whole. As Rachel Carson (1907–1964) warned in her book *Silent Spring* (1962), we are destroying the Earth’s environment in an irreversible manner, and this is something that affects not only the present but also the distant future.

In the modern era, it has become impossible for us to discuss ethical issues without paying attention to future generations and the Earth’s environment as a whole. Someone who has thought deeply about ethical issues from a new perspective in the midst of these circumstances is Hans Jonas (1903–1993), a philosopher who was born in Germany but spent his teaching career in Canada and the United States.

As its title suggests, in *Das Prinzip Verantwortung, Versuch einer Ethik für die technologische Zivilisation* (The imperative

of responsibility: In search of an ethics for the technological age) (1979) Jonas conceives of a new ethics based on a 'principle of responsibility'. In previous conceptions of ethics people have been seen as having to make their own decisions and act in accordance with universal 'maxims' (principles established as guidelines for the actions of individual human beings). A classic example of this can be seen in Kant's fundamental ethical principle, which he referred to as a 'categorical imperative' in the sense that it was a rationally absolute imperative that was to be obeyed unconditionally.

Jonas makes significant changes to this principle, reformulating it as follows: 'Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life' (Jonas 1984: 11). Here what is being addressed is not what sort of principle or motivation you are acting in accordance with, but rather the effects your actions bring about. His 'categorical imperative' is that our actions must not only be such that they do not endanger the lives of the people of the future or their ability to live in a manner fit for human beings, but must moreover be such that they actively protect or guarantee them.

Since the continued existence of the Earth's environment and the survival of future generations are deeply connected to our actions, and since we have the potential to unilaterally determine their fate, we must also give careful consideration to the state of the environment and the survival and rights of future generations.

As was mentioned in the Introduction, the idea of 'sustainable development', that is, 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' has been presented in documents such as 'Our Common Future', the report issued by the United Nation's Brundtland Commission in 1987. In practice, however, more emphasis has been placed on 'development' than 'sustainability', and this continues to be the case today.

In these circumstances, taking into consideration the state of the Earth's environment and the survival and rights of future generations is our responsibility and obligation. At the start of this chapter, I stated that our first task is to indicate the direction 'in which we ought to be headed', and I believe it is these considerations that can show us the way forward.