Disclosing Our Being-with-Others-in-the-Fūdo: A Review of Watsuji on Nature. Japanese Philosophy in the Wake of Heidegger

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David W. Johnson. *Watsuji on Nature. Japanese Philosophy in the Wake of Heidegger*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2019, pp. 256. $34.95. Series: Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy.

David Johnson's book introduces the enormous explanatory potential of Watsuji's view of nature and one of his most original conceptual creations, fūdo*, into the current philosophical discussion. Within the framework of phenomenology and hermeneutics, Johnson brings the idea that nature is part of the very structure of human existence into the limelight. In contrast to the value-free world of nature described by science, at least in a conventional and positivist sense, Watsuji's nature is a meaningful setting in which subjective and objective elements form a unity. This study shows how conceptual resources from different cultural traditions can enrich our view of the self and nature and, at the same time, pave the way to a re-enchantment of nature.*

Key words: *fūdo;* self; nature; phenomenology; hermeneutics; Watsuji; Heidegger

Asked about Heidegger's success in Japan, the philosopher of the Kyoto School Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) once remarked that Heidegger's thought was both profound and capable of placing us in the midst of our everyday life and, echoing Husserl's famous claim, added that it goes directly to the things themselves. As an example of this success, Nishitani's conversational partner, Tsujimura Kōichi (1922-2010), who had studied philosophy at Kyoto University and translated Heidegger, mentioned that *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*, 1927) had been translated into Japanese six times already.[1] In 1924, another pillar of the Kyoto School, Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), had written the first Japanese essay on Heidegger's philosophy,[2] and two years after the publication of a study on Heidegger by the prominent philosopher widely known for his study of the aesthetic notion of *iki*, Kuki Shūzō (1888-1941), 1935 saw the publication of what could well be the first book conceived as a reply to *Sein und Zeit*. The book was entitled *Fūdo* and, as David Johnson explains, its author, Watsuji Tetsurō (1889-1960), began writing it in 1928 in response to problems and themes that he had encountered in Heideggerian views, even though his inquiry actually went above and beyond this goal.

Thus, as the subtitle of *Watsuji on Nature* indicates—*Japanese Philosophy in the Wake of Heidegger*—the exploration of the relationship between Watsuji and Heidegger's philosophies is one of the aims of Johnson's work. This book is included in the prestigious series *Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, whose general editor is the reputed phenomenologist Anthony J. Steinbock. This may not come as a surprise, given the well-known reception of phenomenology in Japan.[3] Indeed, the study of the interpretations of phenomenology by Japanese scholars and the concomitances and divergences among the projects of Japanese philosophers and Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty have proven a fertile ground for further reflection.[4] Johnson situates Watsuji's work within a hermeneutical tradition that includes Herder, Humboldt,

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e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.5.2.11

Heidegger, and Gadamer, which turns his book into a new and valuable contribution. Johnson shows that Watsuji's *Fūdo* cannot be understood without Heidegger's early work. Prompted by the excessive stress that, according to him, Heidegger put on the temporality of being at the expense of spatiality, Watsuji appropiates the concept of being-in-the-world but expands this structure at each of its poles. Thus, Johnson argues that, on the side of the *Dasein*, Watsuji emphasizes the constitution of the self in its relations to others, and on the side of the world, he incorporates nature as it is experienced, which is how the Heideggerian *Sein zum Tode* becomes an existence-towards-life (*Sei e no sonzai* 生への存在). Therefore, while drawing on Japanese tradition, Watsuji's phenomenological account of the self in the wake of Heidegger's thought transforms and develops it.

It is for this reason that this new book will be welcome not only by those interested in Japanese phenomenological research in Japan, but also by scholars involved in the ever-growing field of Japanese philosophy. The role played by Heidegger in such interest is worth mentioning here too. Japanese philosophers felt drawn to his thought, but many western scholars started studying Japanese to be able to read Japanese philosophers who could enter into a dialogue with Heidegger. Despite Heidegger's reluctance to spread the language of western metaphysics on a planetary level, thus preventing access to traditions developed outside it, he can be said to have contributed to fostering an intercultural philosophical practice, although this was arguably not his intention. While he did not make it too explicit in his own work, he cultivated a conversation with Asian interlocutors and left enough clues to open the way for others. In this respect, the philosophy of the Kyoto School and Buddhism[5] has provided a privileged area for exploration. Moreover, in recent years the field has been increasingly expanding to encompass hitherto neglected themes and many other trends and thinkers.

Among Japanese philosophers, Watsuji, who is sometimes regarded as a peripheral member of the Kyoto School, has attracted considerable attention from different perspectives. Well known both in Japan and abroad, in his home country he gained a reputation as an interpreter of existentialism after publishing essays on Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, but he also wrote on Japanese art, culture, ethics, and intellectual history. In addition, he was interested in Buddhism and Christianity, and devoted studies to Zen Master Dōgen[6] and Confucius. As for the translations and the reception of his work abroad, it would seem that his philosophical anthropology as found in *Fūdo* and in his study of ethics and the political implications of his thought have taken center stage.[7] Besides the interest on Watsuji's philosophy from the point of view of the history of philosophy, his views have stimulated thought-provoking developments like the work on "mesologie"[8] by Augustin Berque and on the ethics of care and feminism by Erin McCarthy. In this sense, the philosophy of nature addressed in Johnson's book could contribute to current debates like those on ecocriticism, the anthropocene, and transhumanism. Therefore, David Johnson's clear and detailed analysis of Watsuji's understanding of self and nature and its implications is remarkably valuable.

The book is well-structured in eight chapters. The first, "*Fūdo*: History, Language, and Philosophy," explains how an ordinary Japanese word turned into a philosophical concept, discusses the problems involved in its translation, and critically reviews its interpretations. Johnson conveys its meaning as a "geocultural environment," but recognizes that "there is no exact equivalent of *fūdo* in English, no single word that is able to express what the Japanese term reveals" (24). In accordance with the conception of language as essentially disclosive rather than designative to which Watsuji would subscribe, Johnson prefers not to translate *fūdo*. I personally agree with that decision. On the one hand, philosophical terms often defy easy—or any—translation from one language and culture to another. On the other, as anyone versed in intercultural philosophy would admit, despite recognizing this difficulty, if we do not attempt an approximate translation, we may risk incommensurability, preventing the possibility of an intelligible communication among distant cultures. In the absence of a definitive optimal solution, the choice of leaving *fūdo*

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e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.5.2.11

untranslated offers an opportunity for readers to enrich their understanding and philosophical vocabulary and provides them a new term to talk about things for which their own language may not have a suitable equivalent. Discussing such a term, finding ways to talk about it, and searching for an adequate translation can be an enormously difficult task, but it is also a very rewarding intercultural practice. For instance, at an international conference on Japanese philosophy held in 2019 in Mexico, a scholar from Hong Kong suggested translating *fūdo* 風土 (lit. wind and earth) into Spanish as *terruño,* and for the duration of the conference we found ourselves discussing once and again the pros and cons of this translation, the similarity in meaning and the divergent nuances, as well as proposing other solutions. Eventually, everyone who attended the conference was so familiar with *fūdo* that they ended up using it as a common word, as it usually happens with *Dasein*, *logos,* and *différance*.

As for the concept itself, the first chapter of Johnson's book examines its links with the notion of *Klima* in Herder and tries to solve the conundrum of what kind of nature can be seen as *fūdo*. Admitting, along with Watsuji's critics, that his descriptions of some regions suffer from overgeneralizations and that the size and scope of *fūdo* remains undetermined, Johnson provides criteria to demarcate the concept and make it more operative, understanding it as a portion of nature, as place and space and the processes that unfold within this domain. The debt of Watsuji's *fūdo* with the premodern Sinojapanese sense of nature as *shizen* 自然—namely *what-is-so-of-itself*, a spontaneous process—is revealing. Johnson shows how the continuity of the human self and natural world that Watsuji attempts to capture in and through his concept of *fūdo* can be traced back to the traditional Japanese concept of nature in terms of *onozukara* 自ずから and *mizukara* 身ずから, where nature and self originate from the same common ground. This is precisely Johnson's contention regarding the accusation of determinism or national environmentalism usually directed against Watsuji: "[he] is not advocating an essentialist understanding of nation and nationality as grounded in purportedly 'national' geographical boundaries" (44). On the contrary, not only does *fūdo* not necessarily coincide with a political demarcation, but by rejecting an analysis in terms of subject-object dualism, i.e., we human beings on the one side and the environment on the other, he opened a novel theoretical space where nature is not conceived as an environment external to us, but as one that is lived through and experienced (*fūdosei* 風土性).

This issue is what the book explores in full in the following chapters: the implications of Watsuji's conception of nature as lived through and experienced "as a moment of the structure of human existence" (*ningen sonzai no kōzō keiki* 人間存在の構造契機). The deep unity formed by human beings and the natural space they inhabit leaves us with an already interpreted nature, plenty of qualities and values. A nature that belongs to the very structure of subjectivity runs counter to the usual allegedly objective scientific image of nature. This is tackled in detail in the second chapter, "The Scientific Image of Nature: Dualism and Disenchantment." Watsuji's criticisms of epistemological dualism, according to Johnson, culminate in what he calls "a form of perspectivism in which what appears to a point of view is constitutively tied to this standpoint" (50). Thus, the third chapter, "Beyond Objectivism: Watsuji's Path through Phenomenology," examines this perspectivism in the light of intentionality in phenomenology and Heideggerian *Dasein*. Johnson's account of Watsuji's understanding of intentionality shows that it is primarily existential and refashions the ontological structure of the Heideggerian being-in-the-world. This refashioning entails that the self is what it is not only by belonging to a world but because it is constituted through its relations to other selves. This ontological condition, the so-called being-in-relation-to-others (*aidagara* 間柄), another significant Watsujian conceptual creation, is studied in chapters 4 and 5, "The Relational Self: A New Conception" and "The Hybrid Self: Oscillation and Dialectic." In the latter we find an interesting analysis of the Japanese terms for "human being" (*ningen* 人間) and "human existence" (*ningen sonzai* 人間存在), which Watsuji turned into philosophical concepts to indicate that individuality and relations with others dialectically make up what a human being is.

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e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.5.2.11

After discussing how to rethink the self as an embodied and acting subject in accordance with its social dimension, the last three chapters, "The Space of the Self: Between Culture and Nature," "Self, World, and *Fūdo*: Continuity and Belonging," and "Self in Nature, Nature in the Lifeworld," deepen the philosophical consequences of the spatial dimension of the self. For instance, these deal with the greater emphasis that Watsuji puts on the physical and material aspects of the world in comparison with Heidegger, and with how artifacts come to be seen as expressions of human existence and consequently as expressions of *aidagara,* given that we exist in relation to others. An even more important implication is culture regarded as an essential dimension of nature "inasmuch as a *fūdo* always appears in and through the horizon of a world, a world, moreover, that it also helps, in turn, to constitute" (145). This is a key element to consider in view of the long-established contrast between nature and culture in the western philosophical tradition. The same holds true with regard to the remark that the self as *aidagara* and a region of nature as *fūdo* are continuous and belong to one another, for it overcomes the customary way of considering the human being as an individual who is distinct from the surrounding environment.

Still, Johnson does not avoid the objections that might be raised about the convergence of self and other, nature and culture in *fūdo*. It may undermine the subjectivity of the self, its freedom and individuation, shallowed up by the objectivity of nature, as well as by nature itself, in its objectivity and transcendence apart from the cultural displays of nature captured by the concept of *fūdo*. Hence, at the end of his study, the author works out strategies to overcome these difficulties that Watsuji himself did not explicitly solve. By discussing the historicity of the self and existence as a project, Johnson concludes that the self is more than a simple expression of its *fūdo*: there is always a margin for transcendence. Likewise, he argues that *fūdosei* is the disclosure of nature, not a mere projection, and it presents itself phenomenologically, and so is "neither merely the result of the positing activity of the subject, nor is it an annunciation of the object, a self-giving of the thing in its total and univocal meaning" (194). Both self and *fūdo* are then correlated and codependent modes of self-interpretation. Insofar as the distinction between inner and outer self collapses in our experience of nature, which is then neither a purely subjective nor a purely objective phenomenon, what follows is the challenging suggestion that "our lived experience of nature is the very face of nature itself" and thus *fūdo* foreshadows a "partial reenchantment of nature" (205).

Of course, the promise of a reenchantment of nature does not necessarily involve a nostalgic return to a premodern view of nature, like the ancient notion of *anima mundi*, as an intrinsic connection between all living things in the cosmos. However, Watsuji's view of the self as immersed in, and continuous with nature, and so of nature and subjectivity as ontologically interwoven rather than external to one another, somehow echoes the early Buddhist teaching of interdependence, according to which humans are not ultimately separate from the rest of nature. Johnson mentions the connection between Watsuji's thought and Buddhist ideas, but he does not focus on it or on its religious background. Nevertheless, it is not only that everything in the world is related; the novelty that Johnson suggests is that nature seems to show more fully what it is through human interpretation. In a different framework, modern physics has recognized that, at least at the quantum level, we can only know the part of nature that our experiments reveal, and that the experimenter becomes part of the experiment. Therefore, the fundamental assumption of classical physics that nature exists completely independently of us and has a defined reality and behavior, even when we are not observing it, does not apply in the quantum world. The epistemological consequences of this for philosophical realism are remarkable—and at the ethical level too. In fact, this perspective that does not separate human from nature but emphasizes their creative intertwining can introduce a non-dualistic approach into one of our current major ethical concerns about a more holistic and perhaps ecocentric way of understanding and inhabiting our living planet and into the current debate on the Anthropocene, that is, the idea of a nature no longer existing apart from human beings that John Maraldo has recently discussed.[9] For his part,

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e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.5.2.11

concerning the relevance of Watsuji's work for contemporary discussions, Johnson mentions its valuable contribution to the philosophical significance of place: "the exploration of concrete structures of experience, which […] exemplify the profoundly nondual nature of the self" (213). This point can be related to the aforementioned concretedness of things themselves and everyday life that Nishitani regarded as something that Japanese philosophers appreciated in Heidegger.

What seems to me the greatest achievement of Johnson's book is that it effectively introduces the enormous explanatory potential of Watsuji's view of nature comprised in one of his most original conceptual creations, *fūdo* and its derivative *fūdosei*, into the current philosophical discussion. Within the framework of phenomenology and hermeneutics—in which Johnson is well-versed, as attested by his previous works on Gadamer and Nishida[10]— he brings the idea that nature is part of the very structure of human existence into the limelight. In a well-structured, well-written, and well-argued book, Johnson successfully places Watsuji in line with Heidegger's reconfiguration of the relation between the self and its experience apart from dualistic modern epistemology and ontology. Paying close attention to the concept of *fūdo*, Johnson clarifies how the intelligibility of nature, like the content of human experience, is disclosed and so mediated through our language, practices, and culture, and brought in this way to a kind of expressive articulation.

In sum, *Watsuji on Nature* represents a major contribution to the field and a perfect complementary reading for the readers of *Fūdo*. David Johnson has written a brilliant book. He introduces a problem, opens questions, provides key elements for thinking and a few essential quotations translated by himself, selects the most representative literature on the topic at hand from a vast bibliography, and subtly expresses his viewpoints with criticism based on better or corrective arguments. It is easy to follow, as if he insightfully and with a great analytic capacity destilled complexity to offer core ideas to his readers. I look forward to his next book.

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1 Cf. ed. Graham Parkes, *Heidegger and Asian Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), ed. Harmut Buchner, *Japan und Heidegger* (Sigmaringen: Jan Thorbecke, 1989), and Carlo Saviani, *L'Oriente di Heidegger* (Genova: Il Melangolo, 1998).

2 "The New Turn in Phenomenology" ("Genshōgaku ni okeru atarasiki tenkō"), in *Tanabe Hajime zenshū* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1963-64), 4: 17-34.

3 To mention but a few examples: ed. Nitta Yoshihiro and Hirotaka Tatematsu, *Analecta Husserliana. The Yearbook of a Phenomenological Research, vol. VIII. Japanese Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979); ed. Nitta Yoshihiro, *Japanese Beiträge zur Phänomenologie* (Freiburg: Karl Alber, 1984); ed. Philip Blosser et al., *Japanese and Western Phenomenology* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993); ed. Nitta Yoshihiro and Tani Toru, *Phänomenologie in Japan* (Wurzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2011); ed. Anthony J. Steinbock, *Phenomenology in Japan* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1998); *Phénoménologie japonaise*, Revue Philosophie, 79 (Paris: Les éditions de Minuit, 2003); ed. Nicolas de Warren and Taguchi Shigeru, *New Phenomenological Studies in Japan* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2019); ed. Taguchi Shigeru and Andrea Altobrando, *Tetsugaku Companion to Phenomenology and Japanese Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2020).

4 For example, Keiichi Noe, "Phenomenology in Japan: Its Inception and Blossoming" in ed. Michiko Yusa, *The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Philosophy* (London et al.: Bloomsbury, 2017), 23-39; ed. Tadashi Ogawa, Michael Lazarin, and Guido Rappe, *Interkulturelle Philosophie und Phänomenologie in Japan* (Munich: Iudicium Verlag, 1998); and Hans-Peter Liederbach, *Martin Heidegger im Denken Watsuji Tetsurōs: Ein japanischer Beitrag zur Philosophie der Lebenswelt* (Munich: Iudicium, 2001).

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e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.5.2.11

5 To a lesser extent among Asian traditions, Daoism has also been explored within this framework.

6 *Purifying Zen. Watsuji Tetsurō's* Shamon Dōgen, trans. Steven Bein (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011).

7 *Fūdo* has (partially) been translated into English in *Climate: A Philosophical Study*, trans. Geoffrey Bownas (Tokyo: Japanese National Comission for UNESCO, 1960; reedited as *Climate and Culture. A Philosophical Study* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988); French, *Fūdo, le milieu humain*, trans. Augustin Berque, Pauline Couteau, and Kuroda Akinobu (Paris: CNRS, 2011); German, *Fūdo: der Zusammenhang zwischen Klima und Kultur*, trans. Dora Fischer-Barnicol and Okochi Ryogi (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1992); Spanish (partially), *El hombre y su ambiente*, trans. Juan Masiá and Anselmo Mataix (Madrid: Castellote, 1973; reedited as *Antropología del paisaje* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2006); and Italian, *Vento e terra. Uno studio dell'umano*, trans. Lorenzo Marinucci (Milan: Mimesis, 2015). There is a partial English translation of Watsuji's works on ethics: *Watsuji Tetsurō's Rinrigaku: Ethics in Japan*, ed. Robert Carter and Yamamoto Seisaku (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) and one in German by Hans Krämer, *Ethik als Wissenschaft vom Menschen* (Wbg Academy, 2005).

8 Originally a former term for the science of ecology used mainly in biology, *mesologie* refers here the practice in cultural geography developed by Berque. However, he considers that it can be an attitude or perspective applied in any discipline, since it challenges the modern paradigm by putting human existence back at the heart of reality and no longer making it a simple object. In this sense, mesology concerns logic and all our ways of thinking. Besides, the ideal of mesology is to refound ethics in nature, but a concretely predicated nature, as translated into different cultures. See for instance: Augustin Berque, *Poétique de la Terre. Histoire naturelle et histoire humaine, essai de mésologie* (Paris: Belin, 2014) and *La mésologie, pourquoi et pour quoi faire?* (Nanterre: Presses de l'Université de Paris Ouest, 2014).

9 John C. Maraldo, "Nature Without Us or Within Us?" in *Japanese Philosophy in the Making* 2. *Borderline Interrogations* (Nagoya: Chisokudo, 2019), 429-62, originally presented at the interdisciplinary conference "Does Nature Think?" UNESCO, Paris, June 6, 2019.

10 *Language, Truth, and Reason: Gadamer with Nishida* (PhD Dissertation, Philosophy, The Pennsylvania State University, 2013); "Perception, Expression, and the Continuity of Being: Some Intersections Between Nishida and Gadamer," *Asian Philosophy* 24, no. 1, (2014): 48-66; "The Experience of Truth: Gadamer on the Belonging Together of Self, World, and Language," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 36, no. 2, (2015): 373-96.

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e-ISSN: 2474-1795 • http://scholarworks.iu.edu/iupjournals/index.php/jwp • doi: 10.2979/jourworlphil.5.2.11