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"The Myriads of People Are All One": Andō Shōeki's Self-with-Others

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Abstract
Japanese Edo period thinker Andō Shōeki 安藤昌益 (1703-1762) was one of the most mysterious figures in the intellectual landscape of his time. Very little is known about his life, and only fragments of his writings have survived to this day. His most important work, S*hizen shin'eidō* 自然真営道, presents a vision of the world of nature which is completely non-anthropocentric, thus providing numerous clues and hints for environmental ethics and ecology.

In this short piece, I briefly introduce and translate four sections from Volume 25 of *Shizen shin'eidō*, which contain a philosophical debate between Shōeki and several of his disciples. I also include a short discussion of the notion of "direct cultivation," and of the concept of "self-with-others," which, in Shōeki's philosophical system, represents the very basis for the existence of the human being and of humanity. These fragments are translated into English here for the first time.

Keywords: Andō Shōeki, Edo period, Japanese philosophy, nature, Way of nature, "direct cultivation," "self-with-others"

Andō Shōeki lived and was active in the first half of the eighteenth century (1703-1762), in Edo period Japan. He was born in the village of Niida, in present day Akita prefecture, but not much is known about his life until the 1740s, when the local records of Hachinohe, a small fief in northern Japan,

show he had a practice as a town physician (Joly). There, Shōeki started expounding his ideas and musings about the world in general, and about nature in particular. Over the years, he gathered around him a small following of a handful of disciples, who listened to his talks and helped him transcribe his works.

Shōeki's major work, *Shizen shin'eidō* ("The Way of Functioning of the Truth of Nature"[i]), is undoubtedly one of the richest, most complex and most systematic texts dealing with nature as a philosophical concept written in the Edo period. Yet there is so much more to his intellectual endeavor: he is also a social philosopher, a philosopher of language, a humanist philosopher etc. His writings cover a wide array of topics, from detailed and sometimes contradictory descriptions of the intricate mechanisms of nature, to bulky lexicons and dictionaries where almost all etymologies and explanations are quite phantasmagorical, to anatomical and botanical drawings and so on and so forth. His style – extremely eclectic, sometimes incongruent and often times repetitive – has puzzled many scholars, which explains why there is such a wide range of labels attached to him and his philosophy, covering a whole spectrum from an original thinker (Marandjian) to a utopian (Morris-Suzuki), to a fascinating naturalist philosopher (Berthrong).

Following is a translation of sections 22 through 25 from volume 25 of Shōeki's *Shizen shin'eidō*. The volume, the last one Shōeki wrote, contains an extremely condensed version of the arc of his philosophy, in which most of his major concepts and ideas are brought together in an amalgam that was supposed to serve as a supplement to, and synthesis of, all the other volumes. The sections are part of what is usually referred to as the *mondō goron* 問答語論, the "debate" or the "symposium," which contains a schematic transcript of Shōeki's lectures during several meetings in Hachinohe with his disciples, and the dialogues and debates that followed. Throughout the *mondō goron*, Shōeki is referred to as "Ryōchū," which is one of the pseudonyms he used toward the end of his life. In the sections selected here, four disciples – by the names of Seika, Kōshi, Eitaku and Shinpū – pick up one idea from Shōeki's lectures and respond to it, sometimes in an attempt to confirm that they understood it correctly, and sometimes adding their own examples or interpretations to it.

Even though the short fragments selected here might seem rather simplistic at first sight, there is in fact a lot to unpack in them. For example, I could discuss extensively Shōeki's use of language, i.e. how he pushes the limits of the Japanese writing system in order to create the concepts he needs, by inventing new combinations of ideographs (as in *gosei* 互性, "mutually embedded natures") or by assigning new meanings and readings to them (as in *tenchi*, "heaven-and-earth," written as 転定 instead of 天地); or I could explain in detail the many things that are inevitably lost in translation, such as the correspondence between *seijin* (written as 正人, the "Correct Man" who has a profound understanding of the true Way of nature) and *seijin* (written as 聖人, the "sages of old" who, through their writings, are responsible for humanity's deviation from that same Way of nature), which not only represents a wonderful ideographic pun, but also creates an opposition between two terms that has important philosophical ramifications. Or I could try to discuss at length the meaning of "limpid spirit" (*seisei* 清精) and "turbid spirit" (*dakusei* 濁精), the differences between them, why having only one of them is a bad thing etc. (The two types of "spirits" are, in Shōeki's philosophy, two different sorts of energies all living creatures are born with – and I will leave it at that.) But for lack of space, I will only focus on two things included in these sections: the concept of "direct cultivation," and the phrase "the myriads of people are all one."

"Direct cultivation" (*chokkō* 直耕) is a term coined by Shōeki and it has (at least) three layers of meaning. The first meaning is cultivating the land in order to produce your own food – after all, the second ideograph is *tagayasu*, "to till the land." The second meaning, an extrapolation of the first, is the sum of all creative activities the human mind can engage in. And the third (and most important) meaning is the profound understanding both of the "Way" of nature, and of the fact that this Way is embedded within each and every human being. That is why, in Section 23, where Shōeki and Kōshi mention "finding the Way," they talk about "individual practice." The Way is not something external to the human being, it is not an elusive purpose one has to strive to attain; it is internal, it is immanent, and it can only be attained through a process of introspection and reflection. And, as

Shōeki tells us elsewhere in *Shizen shin'eidō*, once you find the Way, you understand that you, as an individual, are but a part of the intricate system of nature – a *homo naturalis*, as it were (Paşca, "*Homo Naturalis*").

"The myriads of people are all one" (*banban nin ni shite hitori* 万万人ニシテ一人) is a wonderful expression of a key concept in Shōeki's philosophy, namely the idea that the self of the human being can never be an isolated island. Because of *gosei*, the mutually embedded natures, we all contain the other within ourselves and, in turn, are contained within the other. Therefore, the self of the individual is necessarily a "self-with-others," through which we are all connected. That is why, in Section 24, both Shōeki and Eitaku state that there is no human being who is not your friend. All human beings are your friends because all human beings are you, and vice versa. The "self-with-others" is the fundamental premise for the very existence of humanity. Finding the Way through direct cultivation means understanding this.

The Texts (Translated from the Japanese by Roman Pașca)

[22]
Master Ryōchū said:
– The Correct Man walks the Way that is innate, and does not desire writings and learnings that stem from the private law[ii]. He respects the True Way of direct cultivation, and does not commit the crime of placing himself above others in order to eat.
Seika then responded:
– The Correct Man is the one who is born possessing both the limpid spirit and the turbid one in equal, balanced measure, without any of them having disproportionate weight. He is a man who understands spontaneously and thoroughly, without any bias, the relation of mutually embedded natures inherently established between heaven and earth, among all human beings and all things, and between light and darkness. He is different from those who possess by birth two measures of only limpid spirit, or only turbid spirit. Even those who are born solely with limpid spirit are biased. They are the likes of the sages of old, Shakyamuni, Laozi, or Shōtoku Taishi. That is why all their writings and words are biased and erroneous.

Moreover, those who are born solely with turbid spirit are also biased. They are stupid, dull, slow and stubborn. The Way that is innate to all human beings is the True Way of direct cultivation. The writings and learnings that stem from the private law lead to non-cultivation and thievery of the heavenly way of direct cultivation. The Correct Man does not do such things. He respects the True Way of direct cultivation. Those in power place themselves above others and live by non-cultivation and insatiable voracity. The Correct Man does not do such things.

[23]
Master Ryōchū said:
– [Human beings] should not seek knowledge in writings, but instead find the Way through individual practice.
Kōshi then responded:
– Knowledge acquired from writings leads to non-cultivation and insatiable voracity. The individual practice refers to the Way of direct cultivation, which is innate in every person. Finding the Way means not rejecting the fact that the primary matter of Heaven creates the myriad of beings and things through direct cultivation. And if they don't reject the Way of Heaven, human beings will experience no suffering whatsoever.

[24]
Master Ryōchū said:
– You should not look for friends. That is because there is no human being who is not your friend.
Eitaku then responded:
– Since the myriads of people in the whole world are just one, there is no need to only call some of them friends. The myriads of people are all one, so they are all friends. There is no human being who is not your friend. When the myriads of people are all in harmony with the True Way of heaven, true friendship is born. Differentiating between close friends and distant friends, or between your friends and another person's friends, pertains to the way of thinking of the private law, but this [differentiation] does not exist in the True Way. Therefore, avoiding other people or those who are distant to you, and only seeking close friends, is an erroneous

delusion of the private law. If we discriminate between close and distant, or between a [regular] person and a friend, this will cause thievery and rebellion.

[25]
Master Ryōchū said:
– You should not despise people, and you should not aggrandize yourself; you should not praise people, and you should not humiliate yourself. This is how an accomplished human being[iii] should act.
Shinpū then responded:
– Despising other people means aggrandizing yourself. Praising other people means humiliating yourself. When you aggrandize yourself you attract hatred, when you humiliate yourself you attract contempt, which means you are in fact inviting suffering yourself. Therefore, an accomplished human being should never despise, aggrandize, praise or humiliate.

(*Andō Shōeki Zenshū*, Vol. 1, 194-197)

Notes:

[i] The title *Shizen shin'eidō* has been translated in various ways: "Grand Traité du *Shizenshinei'dō*" (Joly), "The Way of Natural Spontaneity and Living Truth" (Heisig), "The Way of the Five Processes and Unitary Generative Force Advancing and Retreating" (Tucker) etc. Interestingly enough, what all these translations have in common is that none of them uses the word "nature" to render the Japanese *shizen*. And even though I myself also prefer to use the original *shizen* instead of "nature," I will stick here with the default translation for the sake of clarity and brevity.

[ii] "Private law" (*shihō* 私法) is a term coined by Shōeki to designate the totality of texts, practices and customs which, in his vision, triggered and reinforced humankind's deviation from the Way of nature. The private (or, self-serving) laws include, for example, all Buddhist sutras, the Confucian *Analects* and all ulterior commentaries, the ancient Japanese chronicles etc. For Shōeki, these are nothing but attempts from those in power to exercise authority and control over other human beings. He refers to the authors of these "laws," collectively, as the "sages of old."

[iii] The "accomplished human being" (written as 為人 and read as *hitotonari* or *hitotari*) is the one who not only understands the Way, like the Correct Man, but has also internalized it through daily practice.

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