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A CHANGE OF HEART – CHANGE THROUGH TRANSFORMATION AND CRISIS

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Time flows, nothing stays the same. Human beings grow, live, and in the end die away – these are the undeniable facts of human life. While these facts also deal with change, what we usually, in our everyday lives, think of as change in human life relates rather to smaller events. Specifically, these have to deal with how we humans as persons change or do not change throughout our lives. In this article, we examine this change in the subjective existence of individuals, its possibility or impossibility, from the viewpoint of Tanabe Hajime's (1885–1962) metanoetic philosophy. In Tanabe's philosophy change is actualized as transformation, made possible by disruption – that is, in disruption, existence faces insurmountable contradictions and only in profound transformation can these contradictions be overcome. Nevertheless, change is here not examined in its temporal or causal aspects. Nor will we examine societal change, for example in the form of the development of democratic institutions. Certainly, individuals are not separate from the contexts they live in, but in this article we will focus only on the individual side in order to provide a more exact reading of Tanabe's philosophy. That is, we examine change as a subjective event.

While this text leans heavily on Tanabean philosophy, it is not only a dissemination of his thought, but, additionally, an exploration of Tanabe's philosophy. For Tanabe, philosophy is a philosophy of action and thus philosophy cannot take a form of mere intellectualism. Therefore this text will not be limited to a mere theoretical analysis of Tanabe's philosophy, but will additionally be *an imagining* – imagining what philosophy of action Tanabe envisions would mean concretely and in practice. This, we believe, is the challenge Tanabe and, taken more broadly, philosophy itself, presents to us; how to live concretely in the light of one's philosophy? In the context of this article the question then becomes: What does change mean for the individual?

Tanabe's self-critique

Tanabe's theory of self-critique begins as and, further develops into, a critique of Kantian critical project. The critique arises from the notion that Kant, and German Idealism in general, suffer "from a propensity to fix the absolute in immanence seeking to mitigate the gap between the absolute and the relative from the side of the relative, namely, itself, such that the relative is treated as the absolute merely in immanent terms". [\[1\]](#) In other words, the

self considers itself to be the measure of all things and, frankly, cannot help but to act from this view. Yet, as will be shown in more detail, the self as self-sufficient reason cannot hold on to this idea of itself.

Being a measure of all things leads ultimately to the loss of self-awareness as the finite relative. In other words, the loss constitutes an attitude where the self absolutizes itself. Therefore, Tanabe can be seen to be arguing against the idea of omnipotent self. According to Takeshi Morisato, “Tanabe is disturbed by philosopher’s general inability to be truthful to their existence as finite, contingent, and uncompromisingly relative humans”. ^[3] This critique is, of course, possible to extend to include a much wider context in society.

Tanabe thinks that if the reason’s critique does not involve the act of critique, the critique of reason can never be fulfilled. To Tanabe, Kant, in a way, forgot himself, the subject that does the criticizing, in his critique. By doing this self critique, however, Tanabe thought that we end up in infinite regress, where every critique gives rise to another self-critique, not fulfilling the critique. ^[4] There are two kinds of consequences, according to Tanabe, caused by this realization. First, one cannot escape the antinomies nor deal with them by oneself. The other point is that the self, while realizing the antinomies, is to be shattered to pieces, as Tanabe would put it. The self, or reason, collapses to its own incapability, its own impossible self-existence. ^[5]

By antinomies, presented in this context originally by Kant, Tanabe means the limits of reason inherent to itself. Antinomies, in this sense, present a flaw in the structure of rationality, showing through themselves the limits of reason. As Morisato points out, Tanabe thought that the rational self’s urge to “bring itself to self-identical unity, as well as to the unity of itself and other, leads to an absolute crisis”. ^[6] Crisis becomes more evident when thought realizes the antinomies as self-produced, for this gives thought no way to ignore or escape this crisis. After realizing the crisis in its rationality itself thought cannot go back to its former position. Thus, the crisis in rationality becomes absolute.

As Morisato stresses, the “absolute critique of Tanabe represents the intellectual passage of human self-awareness”, which fixes it as a historical phenomenon. ^[7] Unlike Hegel, Tanabe emphasizes the death of self as well as the death of philosophy as a gap or chasm in history, not its fulfillment. To Tanabe, then, this critique appears as a historical necessity, rising naturally from the understanding of its uncompleted forms. As historical, this understanding points towards the downfall of reason’s self-sufficiency. As said, in order to be a complete self-critique, the self needs something more than itself. ^[8]

To be sure, one could ask whether this is not the way thought progresses, by building on itself and adding more and more knowledge. This is certainly true and is not where the problem lies. Rather, this accumulation becomes a problem when the self-sufficient self cannot see itself as the result of this accumulated knowledge, but considers itself to be independent from it. However, in this way reason can see itself to be not included in this process of knowledge, it mainly relates to it objectively as an autonomous subject. As said earlier, Tanabe thinks this creates the impossibility to see the relativeness and finitude of the self. Tanabe argues that to gain full autonomy, reason must fully break down through its self-critique. ^[9]

Tanabe’s understanding of reason is transrational, underlining the fact of reason’s incapability to break through itself on its own. Morisato points out that philosophical thinking is not

annihilated nor is rationality doomed to complete irrationality. ^[10] The idea that reason is incapable, or that it needs an “outside” factor to break the chains, should also imply that Tanabe’s focus is to put reason in its correct place – since now it runs amok. Transrational also implies that reason is not based on any “rationalistic framework of thinking” that tries to demonstrate “the immutable self-identity of reason or self”. ^[11] To give an example to the above mentioned point, transhumanists’ critique against traditional humanism’s anthropocentrism seems somewhat similar to Tanabe’s urge to stress the transrational, to take into consideration more than just the rational, or in case of humanism the human centred, aspects of life. Thus, philosophy, or thinking, becomes more than an intellectual endeavour, a matter of concrete action.

Change as Metanoetics – Zange as active remorse

Having presented Tanabe’s critique of reason, let us now move to the transrational – that is, to *zange* and metanoetics. But first, let us see this transition through an analogy.

The ship of reason as captained by itself, sails through the storm of critique of itself, in which it cannot stay its course and, inevitably, becomes stranded on antinomies. After such a cataclysmic event, reason cannot lean onto the structures it had constructed and must, so to speak, continue its journey on foot, i.e., turn a critical eye towards the structures it had built and which are now, by passing through the storm, torn from their foundations.

For Tanabe, metanoetic philosophy starts from self-critique. This is in response to one’s incapability, to the fact that reason is not omnipotent, nor am I. Self-critique thus takes on the weight of remorse regarding one’s past actions. ^[12] It is a shame not one of us can escape, the shame of our being which is thrown into the world, and into situations we cannot escape nor control. Thinking then becomes after-thinking (*metanoia*), and is directed towards the things we have done, the failures we have experienced, and the intentions which went wrong. Past actions and the experience of and through them is the fact of human life. ^[13] Thus, self-critique is a historical necessity, or an inevitability if one is to follow rationality to its very end.

Yet shame and after-thinking are not mental states to dwell on. This “process” Tanabe calls *zange*. *Zange* is the activity born out of our disgrace, an activity where we want to be better than we were. It is submitting to that remorse, humbly bowing one’s head before it. In *zange*, one stops running away from the past, for there is no place to run to. One could perhaps differentiate *zange* from mere shame or remorse precisely in that *zange* is active, not passive dwelling on one’s shortcomings. Instead, *zange* transcends passive shame in which the self just hides herself away, and becomes the disruption in this remorseful being, a transformation (*metanoesis*) of one’s being. As an activity of the mind or consciousness, *zange* is not a passive acceptance of doctrines. *Zange* as an active process implies the absolute critique of reason, pointed out above. Although self-interest seems to be embedded in human existence, it is imperative to recognize one’s own life’s (reason’s) contradictory and disruptive nature. ^[14]

To conclude, a look at a concrete expression of *zange* is in order. As Tanabe states,

Nevertheless, if we submit obediently to this destiny, choose this death willingly, and throw ourselves into the very depths of these utterly unavoidable contradictions, reality renews

itself from those depths, and opens up a new way, urging us to head in the direction which actuality is moving and to collaborate with this movement. Accompanying reason's option for its own death, the gate of contradictions, which was barred as long as reason clung to self-reliance, is thrown open. Contradictions do not thereby cease to be contradictions, but restore reason to a transrational dimension, where it can serve as a mediator to, or collaborator in, the transformative activity of the absolute. ^[15]

In *zange* – that is, in repentance – it becomes evident to the self that I am not as I thought – I cannot always act as I would like, inadvertently do things which hurt those I care about, and cannot always be as understanding as I would like. For many, at least some part of this experience rings with familiarity – and so does the question that follows: What do I do in the face of this experience, this repentance? Do I latch onto myself, dwelling on repentance – of being a failure – whilst, again inadvertently, raising my own ego on the path of true repentance as acknowledgement of what I have done? For in repentance there is no room for an “I” – if I make the things I did *my things*, *my failures*, they become abstractions severed from experience, which contains two sides: I who did things and the one who felt the effects of those deeds. In making the things I did *my things*, the other is no longer present, only the “I, the maker of things” and the “I, the possessor of things done” are present anymore. Thus, in such a “dwelling” repentance one turns inward, forgetting the other.

But accepting, and not imagining something that is not real about oneself, that I really did things I thought I would not do, accepting that this “I” is not what I thought it is, destroys that self. Acceptance thus becomes a disruption in the crisis that is repentance. Yet there is no separation between the two: Repentance *is* disruption and disruption *is* repentance, enabling an opening where the self is and is not. The self that did wrong is, but in recognizing and accepting the wrongness done, that self is no more. Yet the suffering from accepting one's misdeed remains. Acceptance is the balsam, which eases the suffering, making it bearable to the self – for bear it she must.

In carrying the pain of one's misdeeds, in letting it crumble the self who carries it, the self can truly transform, for the transformation that becomes possible is not one conceived by the self – it happens naturally, through the path the self now must travel with its burden. Now, the path is all that remains to the self – it is the only road to salvation, the only hope of change. Yet this is a hope that does not promise anything, it just shines its light on the path traveled, enabling one's journey to a – possibly – better future self. At least, that self will be different.

As reflected in the paradoxical language used here, change is paradoxical in nature, it cannot be machinated, and only by encountering something to which the self cannot say “no” to – here presented by suffering and repentance – can one truly change.

As we try to understand this change in question, we come to find something relatable in Chinese Zen master Qingyuan Weixin's metaphor. To conclude, we will interpret it in this tanabeian context.

Thirty years ago, before I began the study of Zen, I said, 'Mountains are mountains, waters are waters.' After I got an insight into the truth of Zen through the instruction of a good master, I said, 'Mountains are not mountains, waters are not waters.' But after having attained the abode of final rest [that is, Awakening], I say, 'Mountains are really mountains, waters are really waters.'

And then he asks, 'Do you think these three understandings are the same or different?' ^[16]

For Qingyuan here change is twofold. Firstly it happens in the object that is taken to be a subject, in the subject-as-object. These are the first two stages in Qingyuan's statement, of thinking that mountains are mountains and waters waters, and then subsequently thinking they are not mountains nor waters. Here the subject is thought to change, but in actuality, the subject only transforms from one pole to another – from being to non-being, from affirmation to negation. This does not change who the person is.

For example, a person can be an overachiever who always strives to do her very best and to always have something going on. When fed up with this mindset, she then strives to just be in the moment, to downshift. But this is just another extreme mindset, and the person just exchanges one mindset for another.

In other words, in neither case change happens through disruption. In disruption the change happens within that change itself and is not a sequential event. That is, in true change, we do not deal with certainties or absolutes, but rather with paradoxes and contradictions. ^[17] A human being seeks certainty and absoluteness for her being, but the true and concrete existence one experiences in this world is vague and relational. From this a contradiction in one's existence arises, for example between oneself and the other, or between one internal aspect of oneself and another internal aspect.

Additionally, Qingyuan's example points to a difficulty in conceptualizing change. For in this example, change takes the form of profound transformation from one view to the next – that is, from one view on reality to another. In other words, change here is seeking for the fundamental, yet, as a result, one tends to chase the new and the exciting. True change as transformation is realizing that this reality, right here in all its filthiness – and its wonder too – is all there is. That is why, after the mountains and rivers were thought of as not being mountains and rivers, they are realized to be just those things – mountains and rivers. That is to say, change does not take us away from this reality to a transcendental dimension somewhere else.

Who the person usually is trying to change is not herself as she is, but as she thinks herself to be – the person as an object. To truly change herself, she must go through a self-negation, which results in the fact that mountains are again mountains and waters are waters. Self-negation can be seen here as action in a very strict sense. Like taking a step, you actually take it, not merely think about it – that is, the self itself is negated and something new comes forth.

In conclusion, Tanabe's metanoetic project seems to be holistic and extremely (self-)critical to the very end. Taking into consideration the rational aspect of thought, as well as the emotive aspect of our being, Tanabe's inquiry reaches into the very depths of our existence, revealing the often overlooked ways we, as humans, are limited both in thought and deed. In revealing this, Tanabe gives us a choice: Do we latch onto our conception of ourselves as it were before the critical inquiry? Or do we let the results of that inquiry break that conception apart for it to be built anew?

Zange as transrational can also be understood as an approach taking into account, as explained above, the parts of thought which traditional philosophy has overlooked, and as an attempt to see beyond one's conditioned self mired in omnipotent illusion. For Tanabe, the

point of such seeing is not a romantic return to wholeness nor an individual's disappearance into the universal, but a more relational and co-dependent existence.

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[[2]] see Shinran 2012; Unno & Heisig 2020 [[2]]

Viitteet (↵ palaa tekstiin)

1. Morisato 2022, 23-24.[↵](#)
2. Morisato 2022, 23-24.[↵](#)
3. ibid. 25[↵](#)
4. see Tanabe 2016[↵](#)
5. Morisato 2022, 33[↵](#)
6. Morisato 2022, 26[↵](#)
7. ibid.[↵](#)

8. Tanabe 2016, 118^{[↗](#)}
9. Tanabe 2022, 27^{[↗](#)}
10. *ibid.* ^{[↗](#)}
11. Tanabe 2016, ??^{[↗](#)}
12. *ibid.*^{[↗](#)}
13. Morisato 2022, 55^{[↗](#)}
14. Tanabe 2016, 125^{[↗](#)}
15. Abe 1985, 4^{[↗](#)}
16. Collected works of Tanabe Hajime vol.13, 193. ^{[↗](#)}

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