

**Ontological Deprivation and the Dark Side of *Fūdo*: a Commentary on David W. Johnson's *Watsuji on Nature: Japanese Philosophy in the Wake of Heidegger***

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A central concept within the Japanese Kyoto School of philosophy is *basho*, or “place.” For Kitarō Nishida, the founder of the Kyoto School, “place” captures the enveloping context in which subjects are non-dually integrated with their world, the dynamic self-world intimacy out of which dichotomized terms like subject/object, self/other, ideal/real, mind/matter, and is/ought are abstracted. Other Kyoto School figures like Tetsurō Watsuji and Shizuteru Ueda develop this idea. As Johnson’s wonderful study demonstrates, one of Watsuji’s most important contributions is to link his rich analysis of *place*—or, to use his favored terms, *fūdo* (roughly “geocultural environment”) and *aidagara* (“betweenness”)—with the *body*. For Watsuji, the different places and relationships (i.e., forms of betweenness) in which we live, move, and connect with others not only furnish resources we need to get on with everyday life. They also shape structures of our *embodiment*. In other words, they specify both how we experience ourselves as well as how we live through our bodies-in-relation to the world and others. For Watsuji, *fūdo* captures this co-constitutive relation between self and world.

Johnson's study is a rich and careful investigation of this basic idea, and the most comprehensive analysis of Watsuji's thought available in English. Among many other important contributions, it provides further evidence that Watsuji is a first rate—and uncommonly broad—philosopher. I cannot do the book justice here. Instead, I want to focus on this basic theme running throughout both Watsuji's corpus and Johnson's study: again, the ontological interdependence of self and *fūdo*. As Johnson tells us at the start of his book, Watsuji develops a thoroughly relational approach challenging an individualist picture of the self as completely encased in its distinctive biological profile, separate from the world. Instead, "at the heart of his thinking about nature is the novel and radical claim that nature as it is experienced and lived through is part of the very structure of human existence, such that the self is immersed in, and continuous with this dimension of nature" (Johnson 2019: 3).

However, rather than focusing on the ontological dependence of self and world, I want to broaden the discussion by instead considering what Serena Parekh terms "ontological deprivation": different ways individuals can be situated *outside* of *fūdo*, or "the ground from which one can engage meaningfully with others and with the world that is shared in common" (Parekh 2016: 91). As we'll see, this phenomenon takes different forms. But it is not something Johnson explicitly discusses. Like Watsuji, his focus is rather on how this ontological dependence might lead to a partial "reenchantment of nature," a renewed sense of awe, wonder, and appreciation for the many links that collectively bind us to our world. In this way, Johnson's focus is on the "light side" of *fūdo*, as we might put it. He argues that Watsuji's thinking can banish the darkness of alienation and loss of orientation that descends when we lose touch with nature and our deep dependence on it. Watsuji, he tells us, "holds out the promise of a

reconciliation with the world—one that answers our striving to be at home in it” (Johnson 2019: 209).

By instead considering what I’ll refer to as the “dark side” of *fūdo*—some ways bodily subjects are *deprived* of contexts of betweenness they need to maintain their orientation and sense of agency in the world—we not only find additional support for Watsuji’s claims about the basic ontological connection between self and world. We also find further affirmation for Johnson’s insistence that Watsuji remains relevant to a range of contemporary issues. So, my comments here are not offered as critique. Instead, they are an invitation. I offer them as a way of continuing the exegetical and applied work Johnson models in his excellent book, a way of sparking “flashes of vision in which we suddenly see what *fūdo* and *aidagara* come to” when used in concrete ways (Johnson 2019: 11).<sup>1</sup>

### **Life on the Dark Side**

One of Johnson’s many important contributions is to unpack Watsuji’s complex phenomenological analysis of space, and particularly the interconnections between body, space, and material culture (i.e., the tools, technologies, and other artifacts that are part of our everyday environments). Of course, other phenomenologists like Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty are similarly concerned with space. Like Watsuji, they all observe that as embodied subjects, we not only *take up* space. We also *live* it. We have an implicit proprioceptive and kinaesthetic sense of where our bodies are located in space and what sort of things our bodies can do given the character and layout of the spaces around us. When I am at home, for instance, I move and do things in ways I don’t when at work or in a public space I share with others; I know where things are at and can bodily navigate that space with a freedom and flexibility missing from other

contexts. We contour our everyday spaces (homes, workspaces, schools, restaurants, gyms, spaces of worship, clubs, pubs, medical offices, etc.) to fit our bodies and support—or in some cases, constrain—their capacities for movement, action, connection, and expression.

In this way, Watsuji tells us, lived space—in contrast to the physical space of tables, rocks, and trees—“is not so much the essential quality of a physical body as it is the manner in which a subject operates” (Watsuji 1996: 170–71). It flows from our *agency*. However, where Watsuji departs from other phenomenological analyses of space is, as Johnson observes, with his insistence that “the existential character of subjective space is disclosed first and foremost... in the relation between self and another, and so in the predominantly *subjective* rather than objective significance of the distances between practical subjects” (Johnson 2019: 124). As Watsuji puts it, the lived space of embodied subjects is fundamentally *intersubjective*, “the betweenness itself of subjective human beings” (Watsuji 1996: 157).

So, within the bodily dynamics that drive early infant-caregiver interactions, for instance—one of Watsuji’s favorite examples—infants experience and negotiate lived *intersubjective* space before they understand physical or objective space. This is because “a [carer’s] body and [their] baby’s are somehow connected as though one. To contend that there is no such connection between them, because the link connecting them is not an actual cell is valid for physiological bodies but has nothing to do with subjective bodies” (Watsuji 1996: 62). Caregivers manipulate this shared space by using touch and gentle movements to prompt sucking responses and regulate fussy infants’ attention and emotions, and infants, in turn, play a participatory role by responding to these movements, prompting further responses from caregivers in which both realize a shared attentional and affective convergence. Within these early exchanges, infants learn about themselves, their bodies, and their spatial and intersubjective

capacities by helping to co-construct the rhythm and qualitative character of these interactions—crucially, Watsuji argues, *before* they understand objective space, or even the practical “equipmental” space that Heidegger is primarily concerned with. Johnson summarizes: “Watsuji’s contention is that this (inter)subjective space is more primary than the existential spatiality opened up by the equipmental and involvement wholes that ground Dasein’s comportment and activities” (2019: 125).

An important consequence of Watsuji’s analysis of space—which follows from his argument for the qualitative primacy of (inter)subjective space, and which also brings us back to the potential “dark side” of *fūdo*—is the idea that space is not something found pre-given in the world. It is actively constructed and manipulated. Lived space, Watsuji tells us, is “the manner in which multiple subjects are related to one another. It is not a uniform extendedness, but a dialectical one, in which relations such as “far and near, wide and narrow” are mutually transformed into one another” (Watsuji 1996: 157).

For present purposes, the key point is this: by deliberately organizing spaces that comprise our shared world, we determine what we *do* with the space of betweenness—that is, how we connect with others in and through it. Even more importantly, in creating spaces, we are at the same time *creating selves*. We fashion spaces that determine what bodies that inhabit them do, and how these bodies experience and interpret themselves *as bodily selves* when they move through them. Crucially, we can furnish spatial resources that support the presence and development of certain bodies or, conversely, deprive them of such resources.

To make this point more concrete, consider how different spaces within everyday life support context-specific forms of bodily expression and connection: from classrooms, night shelters, hospitals, and sporting arenas to online video chats, mosques, queer clubs, military

barracks, and political rallies. Within these spaces—this is really the heart of Watsuji’s argument—our embodied subjectivity *extends into and takes shape* within their distinctive contours. We experience our bodies differently within them insofar as they furnish distinct forms of betweenness. Once more, Johnson’s careful exposition is helpful. Watsuji, he notes, terms this phenomenon of bodily extension “subjective extendedness” (*shutai-teki na hirogari*) (Johnson 2019: 119). In creating spaces of betweenness, we create possibilities for subjective extendedness. And by creating *shared* spaces for subjective extendedness, we create *social* bodies; we bring bodies into “forms of alignment” (Ahmed 2006: 15) by specifying what is possible and permissible for bodies when they inhabit certain spaces.

In this way, we create spaces that support the growth and development of the self’s subjective extendedness. But we can also create spaces that impose limitations on selves by depriving them of such possibilities. Something like this is what Parekh seems to have in mind with her idea of “ontological deprivation,” or what I’m calling the “dark side” of *fūdo*. Let me conclude by briefly giving two examples to illustrate this point.

### **Ontological Deprivation: Two Case Studies**

Ontological deprivation occurs within the dynamics of everyday life when certain kinds of bodies are deprived of possibilities for agency and subjective extendedness. For example, consider the way autistic individuals<sup>2</sup> often find it difficult to navigate and comfortably settle into everyday places, spaces, and forms of betweenness set up to accommodate neurotypical (i.e., non-autistic) bodies.<sup>3</sup> The spatial and material layout of homes, schools, workplaces, markets, restaurants, gyms, airports, etc.—as well as the customs, rituals, habits, practices, language, and patterns of emotional expression and sharing that comprise them—are primarily organized

around the forms, and *norms*, of neurotypical bodies. But autistic bodies have different sensorimotor habits, needs, values, and expectations that make it difficult for them to fully extend into and take shape within these spaces (Donnellan, Hill, and Leary 2012).

For instance, autistic people often avoid eye contact when speaking with someone or pause for extended periods during an exchange, practices that neurotypicals may find off-putting and difficult to parse. Or, their auditory and visual hypersensitivity may lead them to “stimm”—engage in repetitive self-stimulating behavior like hand-flapping, rocking back and forth, twirling a piece of string, or repeating a word or phrase—as a way of dealing with the bright lights, temperatures, smells, cramped arrangements, and unpredictable noise of the spaces they move through while finding their way in the world. As a result of this mismatch between the needs of the autistic person and their wider environments (i.e., *fūdo*), autistic people regularly describe feeling cut off from ways to connect with others in and through the spaces they inhabit. They describe difficulties fitting into and becoming oriented within these spaces, difficulties developing their subjective extendedness.

More precisely, they often describe feeling a persistent absence of possibilities for *sharing* and *reciprocity*. And they do so because their distinctive ways of experiencing and talking about the world are not recognized by the people and places they come into contact with, creating barriers that lead to a diminished sense of agency and recognition. So, we find many reports like the following:

“I feel lonely a lot of the time because I always feel like I am on the outside looking in...Loneliness, for me, looks like I am in the world but can’t interact with it, almost like being a ghost” (quoted in Deaton (no date)).

“I cannot talk about my real experience of life to most people, because they wouldn’t understand or be interested. That makes me feel... ‘lonely in a room full of people’ and I’m fed up with it” (quoted in Umagami et al. (2022, 10)).

By depriving autistic people of opportunities for reciprocity, these spaces shape how they experience their body and its relation to the world. Autistic bodies try to extend into these spaces and feel them resist and push back, diminishing their agency and limiting their possibilities for growth, development, and connection (Krueger forthcoming).

Ontological deprivation also unfolds at a more encompassing geocultural level. Consider next the loss of bodily at-homeness often experienced by refugees, asylum seekers, and those who undergo forced displacement. In many instances, these individuals become bodies with no place in the world. They are still living bodies, of course, capable of moving through the world and connecting with others. But they do not necessarily *belong* to a specific place. Rather, they are deprived of resources needed to cultivate their full “subjective extendedness.”

This deprivation occurs because stateless people, like asylum seekers, are forcibly uprooted from the *fūdo* and forms of betweenness familiar to them and instead must move through an extended series of temporary spaces like refugee camps, reception centers, makeshift settlements, detention, and other accommodation centers. Inhabiting these spaces is, of course, a kind of betweenness. But it is an experience of living in the shadows of betweenness, “an experience of living in the world while being maintained on the margins of the states, in a spatial, legal, and political in-between zone” (Agier 2016: 464). These spaces are intentionally set up as “out-places” set apart from rich temporal, practical, and geocultural links with the rest of the world.



Watsuji's analysis of *fūdo* can again help us see how the loss of agency one experiences in these in-between spaces is not merely legal or political. It also impacts *the self*. While confined to these spaces, asylum seekers and other stateless people are separated from their bodies as lived entities insofar as their spatial and intersubjective possibilities are controlled by authorities, many of whom look to exclude them from finding new homes within the Western world (Agier 2016: 463–64). For these reasons, Parekh argues that refugee policy “ought to be concerned with addressing the ontological deprivation of statelessness, and not merely the political harm of loss of citizenship” (Parekh 2016: 83). This is because forced statelessness, being forcibly uprooted from one's *fūdo*, involves more than a loss of legal rights and political agency. If Watsuji's analysis is on the right track, forced statelessness is more fundamentally a diminishment and deprivation of one's subjective extendedness, one's bodily self (see Vallely 2018).

In sum, these observations about the potential “dark side” of *fūdo* are not offered as a critique of Johnson's rich and exciting study. Again, they are an invitation and a celebration. They are meant to invite more thinking about ways we can put Watsuji's considerable resources to work, and in so doing celebrate the rich exegetical path Johnson has laid out before us.

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2. I here follow terminological preferences of neurodiversity proponents who endorse identity-first language (“autistic persons”) (Pellicano and Stears 2011).

3. See Krueger (2019, 2020, 2021) for longer discussions of how Watsuji can help us better understand social difficulties in autism and psychopathology.