The Review of Life Studies Vol.8 (October 2017):15-22

Philosophy of Life in Contemporary Society

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1. Introduction

Academic bioethics and environmental ethics were imported from the United States and Europe to Japan in the 1980s. At that time I was a graduate student. I started studying the English literature on those disciplines, but I soon developed a huge frustration with them.

The first reason for this was that bioethics at that time lacked deep philosophical investigations on the concept of life and the concept of death, and without having undertaken such investigations they were trying to figure out sound guidelines on difficult ethical issues surrounding advanced medicine. Of course, consensus building is very important, but it seemed to me that pursuing consensus without a deep philosophical understanding of life and death was senseless and fruitless.

For example, in the 1970s and 80s there was a worldwide debate on whether or not brain death is human death, and many advanced nations concluded that a human being that has lost the integrated function of the whole body should be considered dead, and that when the function of the whole brain is irreversibly lost the integrated function of the human being should be considered to disappear permanently. However, in the debate about brain death, the fundamental question of "what is death?" has rarely been investigated from a philosophical point of view. Philosophically speaking, the reason that a human being that has irreversibly lost the function of the whole brain should be considered dead is not so crystal clear. It should also be noted that this question was heavily discussed in the Japanese debate on brain death in the 1980s and 90s.

The second reason for my frustration derived from the fact that bioethics in the 1980s was established in the disciplines of medicine and biotechnology even though the term "bioethics" had been first defined by V. R. Potter in 1970 as the

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science of survival in the age of global environmental crisis. At its inception, therefore, bioethics was conceived as a kind of "environmental ethics", and this aspect was stripped away from the concept of bioethics later in the 1980s. I was frustrated because I had the intuition that our moral attitude toward human life should be deeply connected with our moral attitude toward nature and the environment. I believed that bioethics and environmental ethics should never be separated from each other.

On the other hand, I cannot help having a strange feeling when I turn my eyes to the discipline of contemporary philosophy; that is to say, while we have "philosophy of language," "philosophy of religion," "philosophy of law", and so on, we do not have "philosophy of life" as an independent philosophical discipline. This is a very strange phenomenon. Of course we have "*philosophie de la vie*" and "*Lebensphilosophie*," but these terms only mean a series of philosophical theories that appeared in 19th and 20th century Europe, for example, those of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and other philosophers. It is clear beyond doubt that philosophies motivated by a keen interest in the phenomenon and concept of life had appeared in the age of ancient Greece, and other parts of the ancient world such as India and China. In Japan, we have many philosophers who contemplated the philosophy of life from the 9th century to the modern period. We have to broaden our eyes to include different traditions, continents and centuries when talking about the philosophy of life.

2. Image of Life

In the late 1980s, I conducted a questionnaire study on the image of life in contemporary Japan. I asked ordinary people and children to write freely about what kind of image they would have when hearing the word "life" ("*inochi*" in Japanese). I collected more than 1,000 responses from them. In 1991, I published the paper "The Concept of *Inochi*", which was republished under the title "The Concept of Life in Contemporary Japan" in 2012.[1] While there were many books on Japanese view of life, what was discussed in those books was the views of life held by famous scholars or religious figures in the past. I could not discover any ideas of life currently held among ordinary people just by reading such books. This was the main reason I conducted the above

[1] Masahiro Morioka, "The Concept of Life in Contemporary Japan," *The Review of Life Studies* Vol.2 (April 2012):23-62. (http://www.lifestudies.org/inochi.html)

questionnaire research.

I will show you an example of the image of life found among ordinary citizens. The following is the response from a female Christian in her 30s.

> …. I feel that life means something which embraces one's whole life, one's mind, one's way of life, love, and whole human existence. And I think one's life is something that is entirely given. I think life is irreplaceable because we cannot get it at all by our own will, nor with effort, nor with money…. If my life is irreplaceable, then others' life must be the same. Others' lives are connected to mine, and all these are in the stream of a large life. Life is, on the one hand, each individual being, unique and irreplaceable. On the other hand, however, it is one large life of the whole human race.… Aren't such formless reminders of a deceased person, such as influence, impression, his/her way of life, thought, and religious belief a part of life? In this sense, I think lives could be taken over, be connected, and meet each other beyond space and time.[2]

She says she is Christian, but I do not find any special Christian ideas on life in her response. This is a very well written image of life that is frequently expressed by ordinary Japanese people, and I suppose many people in the world would be able to share her view of life. This might show that the basic views of life are shared by people in various cultures and traditions around the world. The difference is in the way they express their ideas.

By analyzing their responses, I found two key terms: "irreplaceability" and "interrelatedness." Many respondents use these two words dialectically when thinking about life. I made the hypothesis that there is a metaphysical position among people that "Life is irreplaceable because it is interrelated. Life is interrelated because it is irreplaceable." I called this "the metaphysical structure of life."

Another interesting thing found in the replies is that many respondents were thinking about life in connection with nature and the environment. They talked about the life and death of a human being against the backdrop of nature: the rising sun, flowing rivers, singing birds, and breathing wind. They seemed to

[2] Ibid., pp.33-34.

think that human life and nature are closely connected on a deeper level.

3. Proposal of "Philosophy of Life" as a Philosophical Discipline

I gradually began to think that "philosophy of life" should be a discipline of academic philosophy. In today's academic philosophy, we have "philosophy of biology," which deals with creatures' biological phenomena, "philosophy of death," which concentrates on the concept of human death, and "philosophy of meaning of life," which investigates difficult problems concerning the meaning of life and living. However, we do not have "philosophy of life," which deals with philosophical problems concerning human life and the life of non-human creatures. Hence, I proposed to establish "philosophy of life" as an academic discipline, and started publishing a peer-reviewed open access journal entitled *Journal of Philosophy of Life* in 2011.

The journal defines "philosophy of life" as follows:

> We define philosophy of life as an academic research field that encompasses the following activities:
> 1) Cross-cultural, comparative, or historical research on philosophies of life, death, and nature.
> 2) Philosophical and ethical analysis of contemporary issues concerning human and non-human life in the age of modern technology.
> 3) Philosophical analysis of the concepts surrounding life, death, and nature.[3]

We have published papers and essays on a variety of subjects such as "the ethics of human extinction," "death and the meaning of life," "Fukushima nuclear disaster," "whether or not God is our benefactor," "Hans Jonas and Japan," "Heidegger and biotechnology," and "feminism and disability." All these topics are considered to be examples of philosophical approaches to life, death, and nature. Some of them are topics in the field of applied philosophy or applied ethics, and others are meta-philosophical and metaphysical ones.

In recent issues of the journal, we have particularly concentrated on the issue of philosophical approaches to "meaning of/in life." The question of "meaning

[3] http://www.philosophyoflife.org/

of/in life" is a central axis of philosophy of life in contemporary society. In 2015, we published a special issue entitled *Reconsidering Meaning in Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with Thaddeus Metz*, in which philosophers around the world intensely discussed Thaddeus Metz's book *Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013). And in 2017, we published a special issue entitled *Nihilism and the Meaning of Life: A Philosophical Dialogue with James Tartaglia*, which deals with James Tartaglia's book *Philosophy in a Meaningless life* (Bloomsbury, 2016). In the field of analytic philosophy, there has not been so much philosophical research on meaning of/in life, however, important works are now beginning to emerge and attract readers. Metz is currently looking at East Asia, especially Confucian traditions in China and Japan, and trying to connect some good aspects of Confucianism with Analytic discussions. We might be able to witness the emergence of a philosophy of life that bridges the East Asian traditions and analytic philosophy.

The following is a list of the topics in the field of philosophy of life in which I am strongly interested.

1) Meaning in life in a secular society

Thaddeus Metz classifies philosophical approaches to meaning in/of life into three categories: 1) supernaturalism, 2) subjectivism, and 3) objectivism[4]. Supernaturalism thinks that meaning of life is given by a supernatural being such as God. Subjectivism thinks that meaning in life differs from one person to another. Objectivism thinks that we can judge which one is more meaningful, A's life or B's life. Metz himself argues that objectivism is the best approach to the question of meaning in life, but I do not think so. I have argued that there is a layer in the meaning in life that cannot be compared with anything, and I have called it "the heart of the meaning in life." And my approach is different even from subjectivism in that I argue that the heart of meaning in life cannot be legitimately applied to another person's subjective meaning in life.[5] This can be called a "solipsistic" approach to the meaning in life.

[4] Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford University Press, 2013).
[5] Masahiro Morioka, "Is Meaning in Life Comparable?: From the Viewpoint of 'The Heart of Meaning in Life,'" *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.5, No.3 (2015):50-65. (http://www.lifestudies.org/meaninginlife01.html)

2) From anti-natalism to birth affirmation

From Sophocles to Schopenhauer, there has been a line of powerful arguments insisting that human beings should not have been born at all. One of the recent advocators of this thought is David Benatar. In his book *Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence* (Oxford University Press, 2006), Benatar argues that having been born is always wrong. I think his argument is flawed; however, I highly appreciate that he has reintroduced one of the most important issues in philosophy of life into analytic philosophy. Contrary to Benatar, I have long proposed the concept of "birth affirmation," which means "the state of being able to say "yes" to the fact that I have been born," and I think this concept should be placed at the center of philosophical discussions of human life. Which should be the basis of our lives, a negative attitude to one's life or an affirmative attitude to it? And how can we advocate the latter philosophically?

3) The problem of life extension

"Life extension" and "age-retardation" have been among the most ardently pursued goals in human history. Today, some scientists argue that using future technologies we will be able to live indefinitely without aging. Although many people would welcome life extension and age-retardation technologies, some philosophers suspect that those technologies will not bring true happiness and meaning of life to humans. For example, Hans Jonas and Leon Kass argue that in the age of super life extension our lives will become superficial ones, and we will lose meaning of life because our lives can become meaningful only when they are limited and not indefinite in this world. This topic is closely connected to the question of how we can accept our own death in a secular society.

4) The connection of the living and the deceased

In Japan, as well as other countries in East Asia and many other areas of the world, there are ordinary people who do not think that a deceased family member completely disappears from this world. They are inclined to think that a deceased family member continues to exist somewhere in this world and sometimes comes back to the place she died or lived, and that they can meet the deceased family member's spirit there. Some people say that our society is composed not only by the living but also by the deceased. The topic of "the deceased as an indispensable piece of our society" has not been fully discussed

in the field of philosophy.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, local people have said that they sometimes can feel the presence of a missing/dead family member, for example, in the midst of the breeze of the wind at the seashore near their home. Philosophers should think deeply about what those local people were experiencing when they had such unusual experiences. By doing this, we can shed a new light on the concept of personhood from a very different angle.

5) The dignity of the human body

In the debate of brain death in Japan, not a few scholars and journalists argued that the body of a brain-dead patient has its own preciousness although the patient is considered to have lost her self-consciousness. In modern European philosophy, dignity has been considered to be found in a person's rationality, not a person's body, and this idea created the personhood argument in bioethics, which insists that only the person who has self-consciousness and rationality has the right to life. I have long argued that the body of a human being has its own dignity that is different from the dignity of the mind of a human person. Interestingly, the French law on bioethics states that the human body is inviolable ("*le corps human est inviolable*"), which can be interpreted to mean that the human body has dignity. The value or preciousness of the human body is an important theme of philosophy of life in the age of biotechnology.

6) The connection and difference between biological life and human life

Our intuition tells us that biological life is completely different from human life because while the existence of self-consciousness is the essence of the latter, the former lacks this. But if that is correct, why do we apply the same word "life" to biological life and human life? Don't we see the same essence both in biological life and human life, and call that essence "life"? This is a fundamental question in philosophy of life. Hans Jonas tried to connect these two dimensions. He wrote in his *The Phenomenon of Life* that "[a] philosophy of life comprises the philosophy of the organism and the philosophy of mind. This is itself a first proposition of the philosophy of life, in fact its hypothesis, which it must make good in the course of its execution."[6] Jonas also writes that a philosophy of life "must deal with the organic facts of life, and also with the self-interpretation of

[6] Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, (Northwestern University Press 1966, 2001), p.1.

life in man."[7] This is the point where philosophy of life parts company with philosophy of biology. Philosophy of life deals with a biological aspect of life, an existential aspect of human life, and the connection between these two dimensions of life.

7) The history of ideas in philosophy of life

As I have said earlier, philosophical thoughts on life, death, and nature can be found in every philosophical tradition and in every area of the world. Philosophy of life should not be equated with *Lebensphilosophie* or *la philosophie de la vie*. In ancient India, we can find very interesting philosophies of life in the texts of Upanishad and Buddha's teachings. In ancient China, we can find them in Analects（論語）, Tao Te Ching（老子道徳経）, and Zhuangzi（荘子）. In ancient Greece, we find them in the writings of pre-Socratic thinkers and Aristotle. In the 20th century, we find them in philosophy of biology, deep ecology, autopoiesis, *biopolitique*, and other philosophical thoughts. Of course, bioethics and environmental ethics should be included in this list of thoughts.

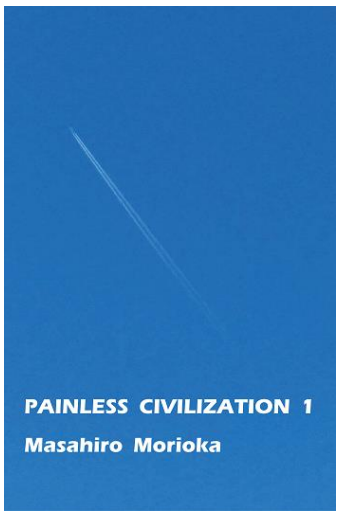
The most important philosopher in contemporary philosophy of life is Hans Jonas. His books *The Phenomenon of Life* and *The Imperative of Responsibility* are the basic literature for philosophers who are interested in this field.

In Japan, to study philosophy has long been considered to study "Western" philosophy. However, in order to study philosophy of life we have to go beyond "Western" philosophy to include every philosophical tradition in the world from ancient times to the current century. This is truly a practice of studying world philosophy.

*This paper was presented at the Fifth China-Japan Philosophy Forum, held at Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, Japan, on September 9th, 2017.

[7] Jonas, p.6.

BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

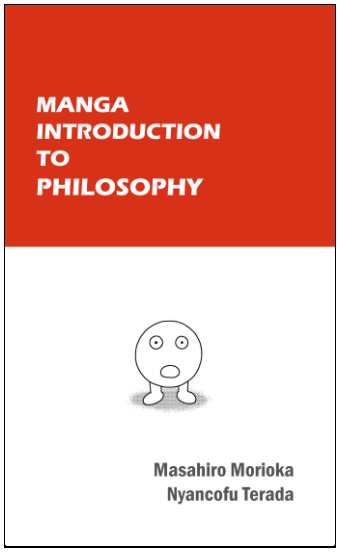


Painless Civilization 1

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2021)

Open Access Book
https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/painless01.pdf

The elimination of pain and the acquisition of pleasure seem to be the ultimate aims of our civilization. However, paradoxically, the endless tendency to eliminate pain and suffering makes us totally lose sight of the meaning of life that is indispensable to human beings. How are we to battle against this painless civilization? Published in Japanese in 2003. The translation of Chapter One was published in 2021 under the title *Painless Civilization 1*.



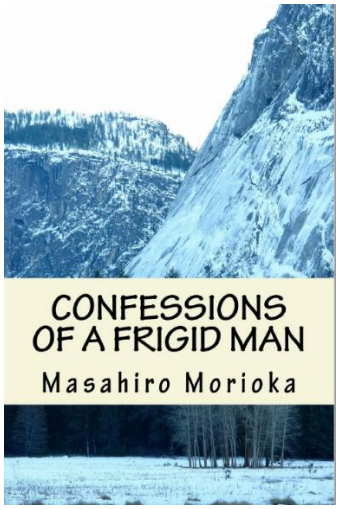
Manga Introduction to Philosophy

An Exploration of Time, Existence, the Self, and the Meaning of Life

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2021)

Open Access Book
https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/mangaphilosophy.pdf
or if it takes a lot of time please visit:
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/351578340

As the title says, this book is an introduction to philosophy. I tried to write about questions like "What is philosophy?" and "What does it mean to think philosophically" for a general readership. This is not a book that presents easy-to-understand explanations of the theories of famous philosophers. Instead, I have tried to express as clearly as possible how I myself think about four major topics: "time," "existence," "I," and "life." By following this route, the reader will be led directly to the core elements of philosophical thought.



Confessions of a Frigid Man

A Philosopher's Journey into the Hidden Layers of Men's Sexuality

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2017)

Open Access Book
http://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/frigid.pdf

The most striking feature of this book is that it was written from the author's first person perspective. The author is a professor who teaches philosophy and ethics at a university in Japan, and in this book he talks about his own sexual fetishism, his feeling of emptiness after ejaculation, and his huge obsession with young girls and their developing female bodies. He undertakes a philosophical investigation of how and why sexuality took such a form within a person who had grown up as a "normal," heterosexual man.

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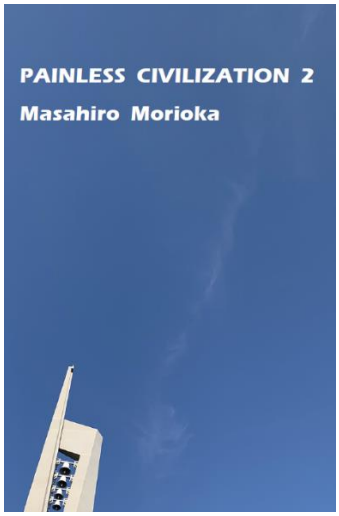


Painless Civilization 2

Painless Stream and the Fate of Love

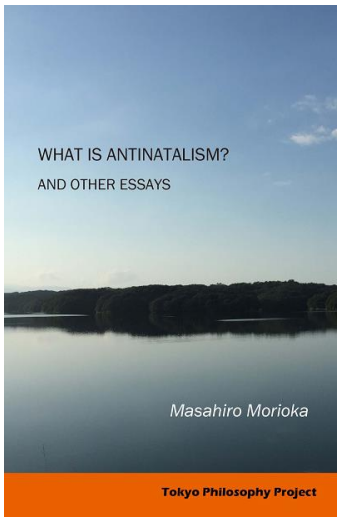
Tokyo Philosophy Project (2023)

Open Access Book

https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/painless02.pdf

This is the English translation of Chapters Two and Three of *Painless Civilization*, which was published in Japanese in 2003. In this volume, I examine the problems of painless civilization from the perspective of philosophical psychology and ethics. I discuss how the essence of love is transformed in a society moving toward painlessness and how the painless stream penetrates each of us and makes us living corpses.

In order to tackle the problems of painless civilization, we must look inside our inner world because the "desire of the body" that lurks within us is the ultimate cause of our society's movement toward painlessness. Love and the meaning of life are the central topics of discussion in the following chapters.



What Is Antinatalism? And Other Essays

Philosophy of Life in Contemporary Society

Tokyo Philosophy Project (2021)

Open Access Book

https://www.philosophyoflife.org/tpp/antinatalism.pdf

This book is a collection of essays on the philosophy of life's meaning in contemporary society. Topics range from antinatalism, meaning of life, the trolley problem, to painless civilization. I am now writing a comprehensive philosophy book on those topics, but it will take several years to complete; hence, I decided to make a handy book to provide readers with an outline of the philosophical approaches to the meaning of life that I have in mind. Antinatalism is the thought that all human beings or all sentient beings should not be born. Although I am not an antinatalist, I believe that antinatalism poses an important question about procreation and the meaning of our lives. This is why I presented an overview of various forms of antinatalistic thought past and present and also performed an analytical examination of their arguments in the first chapter of this book.