

The Human and the Absolute in the Writings of Kuki Shūzō

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Among the metaphysical themes that interested KUKI Shūzō 九鬼周造 (1888–1941), the idea of the human person and its relation to a metaphysical absolute would seem to constitute the keystone of his philosophical system. He dedicated several texts to this theme, in particular: *Contingency* (『偶然性』, his 1932 doctoral thesis), *The Problem of Contingency* (『偶然性の問題』, 1935), “The Philosophy of Authentic Existence” (『実存哲学』, 1933), and “Metaphysical Time” (『形而上學的時間』, 1931).

Kuki elaborated his ideas in studies of Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl, as well as in the light of a sizeable number of Chinese and Japanese texts. Any of these sources would provide interesting leads,¹ but in what follows I have limited myself to elucidating the notion of the human and its relation to the metaphysical absolute by examining Kuki’s own terms and analyzing “The Philosophy of Authentic Existence” as

* The author wishes to express her gratitude to Helen Shall for preparing this English translation from the French original.

1. FUJITA (2002, 117–38) explores Kuki’s investigation and critique of Husserl’s method. For a comparison of Kuki’s three categories of contingency with Windelband and Rickert’s ideas, see MAEDA 2008.

well as the two texts on contingency mentioned above. We shall also refer to one of Kant's ideas of formal logic that Kuki took as a starting point.

THE NOTION OF THE HUMAN IN KUKI'S WORKS

The Human Being and "Disjunctive" Contingency

In his doctoral thesis and its subsequently expanded book, *The Problem of Contingency*, Kuki undertakes an exhaustive treatment of the notion of contingency. To understand the notion of the human that Kuki explains in the last part of his two texts on contingency, we begin by summarizing those texts.

Kuki opens his doctoral thesis by defining three kinds of necessity: logical, empirical, and metaphysical. *Logical* necessity appears in the relationship between a concept and its essential characteristics. *Empirical* necessity is to be found in the empirical relations of cause and effect. *Metaphysical* necessity characterizes absolute metaphysical being (*keijijōteki zettaisha* 形而上の絶対者, KSZ 2: 272). In *The Problem of Contingency*, published three years later, Kuki replaces this terminology to accommodate to the vocabulary of classical formal logic. He cites the forms of relationship between subject and predicate set out by Hermann LOTZE in his *Logik* (1843, 65). According to Lotze, there are only three types of judgemental relations that contribute to necessary knowledge: general judgement (*generalle Urtheile*: s is p), hypothetical judgement (*hypothetische Urtheile*: on condition x, p becomes s), and disjunctive judgement (*disjunctive Urtheile*: a part of the whole, either p, or q, constitutes a predicate of s). For Kuki, these refer respectively to the relationship between a concept and its essential characteristics, between a necessary cause and its effect, and between the whole and any of its parts. Kuki terms these three forms *categorical* necessity, *hypothetical* necessity, and *disjunctive* necessity.

Following on from this, Kuki identifies three forms of contingency that negate these three relationships of necessity, *categorical* contingency, *hypothetical* contingency and *disjunctive* contingency (KSZ 2: 15). He devotes separate parts to examining each of these. The first part considers

judgements between *s* and *p* in which the predicates are not always necessary (*categorical* contingency). The second part is devoted to the analysis of the empirical events considered contingent, chance, accidental. Kuki terms this type of contingency *hypothetical*, because it requires both a condition and a consequence. In the third and final part, Kuki puts forward his thoughts on *disjunctive* contingency, (*risetsuteki gūzen* 離接の偶然), exploring specific existential situations from the perspective of the whole. He also refers to this type of contingency as *metaphysical* (*keijijōteki gūzen* 形而上的偶然).

This third part seems to me the most important for elucidating Kuki's definition of the human person. In it he situates human beings within a wider whole to define them as beings that are simultaneously *separate* (*ri* 離) and *in touch* (*setsu* 接). This term “separate and in touch” is Kuki's way of rendering into Japanese the term *disjunctive* taken from formal logic.²

To better understand this term, it is useful to refer to the definition found in Kant's *Logik*, which was H. Lotze's main point of reference. Judgement is there said to be disjunctive when “the parts of a given conceptual sphere are mutually determined as a whole or complement each other to form the whole.” These judgements “are mutually exclusive and complement each other as members of the whole sphere of knowledge that has been divided.”³

Kant's diagram of disjunctive judgment is instructive here:

	A	
b	c	
d	e	

In a disjunctive judgement, x, which is contained within A, is contained either within b, or within c, etc.

2. Kuki's term has passed out of use. “Disjunctive judgement” is translated in the *Philosophical Dictionary* (『哲学事典』, Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1977), for example, as *sen-genteki handan* 選言の判断.

3. “Ein Urtheil ist disjunctiv, wenn die Theile der Sphäre eines gegebenen Begriffs einander in dem Ganzen oder zu einem Ganzen als Ergänzungen (complementa) bestimmen” (KANT 1924, 106, 108).

Kant gives an example of this kind of judgement in his *Critique of Pure Reason*:

Take, for instance, the judgment, “The world exists either through blind chance, or through inner necessity, or through an external cause.” Each of these propositions occupies a part of the sphere of the possible knowledge concerning the existence of a world in general; all of them together occupy the whole sphere. (Kant 1929, 109; B-99)

Thus Kant uses the term *disjunctive* to talk about relations between judgements, whereas Kuki uses it to think about relations between humans, between human beings and other living beings, and between humans and the whole. Indeed, Kuki enlarges the meaning of *the whole* to embrace the metaphysical *whole*, as we shall see further below.

Let us follow Kuki’s reasoning. To begin with, a human being is merely one part of a whole, a partial being that never coincides completely with the greater totality. In this sense, the human individual lacks an absolute identity and is therefore a contingent being. At the same time, if by definition *the whole* cannot lack any of its parts, the whole does possess an absolute identity.

Secondly, to the extent that human beings are viewed as partial beings, there is absolutely no clear basis for their existence. A person may wonder why she was not able to choose her parents before she was born or why she could not have been born as someone else in a different country. Kuki writes:

Indeed, we could have been Americans, Frenchmen, Ethiopians, Indians, Chinese, or any other nationality. It is entirely by accident that we are Japanese. We could equally well have been insects, birds, or beasts. It is absolutely by accident that we are humans, and not insects, or birds, or beasts. (KSZ 2: 205–6.)

This passage shows that Kuki takes the political community as a given beyond the individual will of a person at the time of birth, and that it is a given governed purely by chance. It also shows that Kuki understands the concept of a living being to include mankind, insects, birds, beasts, and so forth, and that these living beings are on an equal plane with everything else classified as a living being. Let us cite a poem from the

famous eighth-century collection known as *Man'yōshū* that Kuki himself uses to illustrate his point of view:

If, in this present life,
I were happy,
In my next life,
Even an insect or a bird
I would become.⁴

The poem is inspired by the notion of spiritual transmigration that probably came to Japan with the introduction of Buddhist thought.⁵

Kuki thus demonstrates the contingent nature of the human social and existential situation at the moment of birth, and he defends the idea of contingency in the sense of a partial or relative existence that is not self-made. But being born human does not mean being born worthless. On the contrary, being born in human form is a rare and happy stroke of good fortune.

The example that Kuki introduces to explain the point is taken from a Buddhist text that illustrates the extreme rarity, though altogether happy possibility, of being born human. Kuki picks up the metaphor of an immense blind sea turtle whose life expectancy is infinite. The turtle comes to the ocean's surface only once every hundred years. Floating on the sea is a piece of driftwood with one hole in it. The rarity—though not impossibility—of a human birth is said to be comparable to the likelihood of the turtle touching the hole in that piece of driftwood. This metaphor was used by the Buddha in a dialogue with a disciple. The scriptural account of this conversation relates the joy of the disciple at the revelation.⁶ What attracted Kuki to the image, I believe, is its stress on the rare and precious gift of human birth.

4. *Man'yōshū* 348, poem by Ōtomo no Tabito: この世にし 楽しくあらば 来む世には 虫にも鳥にも 吾はなりなむ. The Japanese transcription follows OMODAKA 1983, 3: 319.

5. The official introduction of Buddhism into Japan is considered to date from 552. The transmigration of the spirit is a belief still held by a significant number of Japanese. There is a popular genre of television programme in contemporary Japan in which people use their gifts to “see” someone's previous lives.

6. Cf. *Zō āgon-kyō* 雑阿含経, T. 2: 15-406, 108.

Authentic Existence

To view Kuki's definition of the human from a different philosophical angle, we may examine another of his texts, "The Philosophy of Authentic Existence" (KSZ 3: 50–94), where the human being is defined as *actual being*.

The essay opens with a demonstration of the impossibility of defining being (*sonzai* 存在). To do that, Kuki claims, you would have to say "being is such and such a thing." But being is already implied in the copulative *is* as well as in the attribute *thing*. Neither is it possible to talk about being in terms of the concept of non-being, since this latter presupposes a concept of being. The concept of being thus escapes all determination (KSZ 3: 50–3).

In Japanese propositions containing the verb "to be" (*aru*), however, it is possible to distinguish two modes of being: the potential mode and the actual mode. Depending on which of these two modes is being used, the grammatical element preceding the verb *aru* differs. The potential mode is signalled by *de aru* and the actual mode by *ga aru*. Thus, on the one hand, when a Japanese speaker says, "The triangle is a three-sided polygon," the *is* is rendered as *de aru*, thus indicating the potential mode. In other words, the proposition indicates the conceptual possibility of constituting a triangle.

On the other hand, when we say, "The triangle drawn with a pencil is over there," the *is* in this sentence is rendered as *ga aru*, thus indicating the actuality of the triangle being spoken about. For Kuki, the potential mode of being would refer to the essence of the triangle, that which defines what a triangle is. It would answer the question, "What is it?"—the *quidditas* that corresponds to *quid est*. The actual mode of being corresponds to the concrete, individual existence of a particular triangle (KSZ 3: 59–62).

In order to refer to the actual mode of human beings, Kuki coined the word *jitsuzon* 實存, abbreviating to two Chinese characters the fuller expression *genjitsuteki sonzai* 現實的存在. To the Japanese ear, this phrase expresses the actual, visible mode of being, and belongs to the register of written Japanese without carrying any of the particular nuances or historical allusions that accrue to equivalents in Western philosophy.

As just noted, *jitsuzon* is made up of two characters. The first, pronounced *jitsu*, is shorthand for *genjitsuteki* 現實的 which means real or actual. *Genjitsu* itself can be broken down into the two characters: *gen* 現, meaning the “appearance” of something before one’s eyes, and *jitsu* 實, meaning “ripening of a plant” or its actual “fruit.” From there we have the acquired meaning of “the result of ripening, leading to a new grain that will germinate and bear fruit.”⁷ As a compound word, then, *genjitsu* denotes the appearance of coming to fruition—that is to say, to visible reality. The suffix *teki* gives the term an adjectival function so that it can qualify the word that follows.

If the *jitsu* half of the compound *jitsuzon* is simply a contraction of this fuller meaning, the *zon* 存 half of the compound abbreviates the word *sonzai* 存在, one of the words Japanese use to translate “being” or “existence” as used in Western philosophical texts. Putting the two halves together, *jitsuzon* expresses “actual or real being come to fruition,” but with a certain abstract flavor because of the contractions in its two halves. As the first to use the term in Japanese (KSZ 3: 65), Kuki gave it a weight heavier than the literal rendering of its parts. I therefore choose to render it “authentic existence.” Here is what Kuki himself has to say of the word:

One can speak of *jitsuzon* as *genjitsuteki sonzai*, which is different from potential being. It is with human beings that the meaning of *jitsuzon* is shown most clearly. In the case of human beings, individuals determine their mode of being who they are [*sonzai no shikata* 存在の仕方] and are aware of this decision. Human beings consciously take charge of their own existence. They possess the power of decision over their own mode of being. This is why each human being has its own particular mode of being. The term *individual* discloses its most eminent meaning through human beings. The human individual creates its actual being [*genjitsuteki sonzai*], that is to say its authentic existence [*jitsuzon*], to the extent that it is truly its own (KSZ 3: 76).

7. On the etymological meaning of the Chinese characters, see the 『諸橋大漢和辞典』 [Morohashi larger Japanese dictionary of Chinese characters] (Tokyo: Taishūkan, 1955–1960). The characters in question can be found at: 存 6943, 在 4881, 現 21004, and 實 7294.

This passage makes it clear that for Kuki the human person determines for itself its own mode of being, and in that sense can be said to choose authentic existence.

As to the relationship between individual beings and essence, there are two possibilities: either the essence determines individual beings, or individual beings determine their essence. An example of the first relationship is the figure of Adam in Christian theology. Insofar as Adam is taken to be a universal human, he lacks the character of a particular individual. This is why all people can identify with Adam's sin. From this theological point of view, insofar as persons are compared to Adam, they are not treated as particular individuals but as instances of a general essence.

In the second kind of relationship, individual beings determine their essence. Kuki writes:

Let us consider the situation where an actual being determines its essence. By essence, we mean here the essence of what exists, the essence of "this" being in particular. Essence is traditionally universal, but in the case where universal essence is determined by an actual being, the universal essence becomes the individual essence. Thus, a new problem emerges: the relationship between the individual essence and the individual being, that is between the potential being and the actual individual being. How should we think about this? Some would say that, as a potential being, the individual remains eternally part of divine understanding and that, as an actual being, it is thrown into time. In that case, the particular essence of one's existence would be clearly distinguished. In choosing not to adopt this perspective, we are obliged to think that potential being coincides with actual being in the particular. When the universal determines the particular, the latter is universalized; it is the same thing when the particular determines the universal, the latter becomes particularized. Thus, the particular essence ultimately coincides with the particular being. The actual being at each instance creates the particular essence....

Insofar as a human being determines its own essence, it is not a shadow [of the universal essence], but is rather an "authentic existence" [*jitsuzon*]. I indicated earlier that the actual being—that is to say, being in a restricted sense—is "authentic existence," but it is also possible to say that in so far as an actual being determines its

essence, it would be an “authentic existence.” The human individual is “authentic existence” in the literal sense of the term, because within this being, the actual being determines its essence. (KSZ 3: 79-81)

To begin with, Kuki is clearly saying that the actual mode of a human individual’s being determines that individual’s essence. In this passage “essence” is a synonym for “potential” in contrast to “temporality,” which, as Kuki notes elsewhere, refers to the future (KSZ 3: 231).⁸ Thus, we can say that the actual mode, that is, one’s way of living in the moment, determines one’s future, that is to say, one’s mode of potential being.

Secondly, Kuki emphasizes the relationship of reciprocal determination between the universal essence and the concrete human being. Thirdly, even if Kuki does not himself use the verb *must*, we can interpret his words as meaning that the human being *must* live in such a way that its manner of actual being constantly determines its essence. This nuance of moral obligation is more explicit in others of Kuki’s texts, but we will not pursue that question any further here.⁹ Finally, the claim that “when the particular determines the universal, the latter is particularized” is not intended as a declaration of fact but as a conditional. Thus, towards

8. Indeed, Kuki’s reasoning progresses by positioning itself in relation to Heidegger’s notions of *Existenz*, a temporality yet-to-come, and *Dasein*, the temporality of the present. For a fuller analysis of the similarities and differences between Heidegger’s *Dasein* and Kuki’s *authentic existence*, see SAITŌ 1999, 222–7.

9. I would only mention two of Kuki’s remarks on this question:

理想と現実との間に越ゆべからざる溝渠の横たはることを自覺し、充たされざることが祈願の本質なることを了し、かも善への憧憬に絶えざる喘ぎを持続することは、それ自身に絶対の価値をもっている。

To become aware of an unbridgeable gulf separating the ideal from the real, to understand that dissatisfaction constitutes the very essence of prayer, and yet endlessly to buckle down to it whilst breathlessly aspiring to what is good—all these acts possess an absolute value. (*Keijijōteki jikan* 「形而上的時間」 [Metaphysical time], KSZ 3: 196).

道德の課題とする実践的普遍性は抽象的普遍性であってはならない。偶然を契機として全體を内包的に限定する具体的普遍性でなければならない。

The practical universal, the duty of morality, cannot be an abstract universal. It has to be the concrete universal that determines the whole from its interior; contingent [phenomena] are the opportunity for this [determination]. (KSZ 2: 258)

the end of his text, Kuki writes that the relationship between a particular essence and a universal essence is the most obscure (*gen'en* 玄遠) problematic and the most fundamental question concerning the notion of *jitsuzon* (KSZ 3: 88), leaving no doubt that “authentic” existence is not simply a matter of course.

To consider one way in which Kuki seeks to address this most “obscure” problem, let us return to the text of *The Problem of Contingency*, in particular, to the relationship between the whole and its parts.

THE WHOLE: THE METAPHYSICAL ABSOLUTE

In *The Problem of Contingency* Kuki uses the expression “absolute metaphysical being” (形而上的絶対者 *keijijōteki zettaisha*) or “absolute necessity” (形而上的必然 *keijijōteki hitsuzen*), to refer to what “The Philosophy of Authentic Existence” called “universal essence.” Let us now examine the relationship between absolute and particular being.

As we have seen above, Kuki identifies the particular as part of the whole by referring to it as “disjunctive” being or “being that is simultaneously *separate* and *in touch*.” In his own words:

The disjunctive members suggest the totality of disjunctive possibilities. Thus, if we speak about the totality of disjunctive possibilities, this leads to the ultimate term, to the notion of the metaphysical absolute. (KSZ 2: 235)¹⁰

Kuki links the “totality of possibilities” to the metaphysical absolute. We may note that this was not the case in the example from Kant cited earlier. Kant simply used the term “world” (*die Welt*) to show a disjunctive judgement. What is more, Kant’s reasoning remained on the level of logical judgement. Kuki goes on:

The whole and its parts gain their meaning precisely from their reciprocal relationship. Without parts, the whole cannot exist, and without the whole, the parts cannot exist either. As a result, it is impossible to

10. 離接肢は離接的諸可能性の全體を豫想している。然るに諸可能性の全體といふことは窮極的には形而上的絶対者の概念へ導く。

think about the necessary [character] of absolute metaphysical necessity without the contingent [character] of what is contingent in the metaphysical [sense of the term]. The necessity of absolute necessity is [the character of] that which possesses totality by containing its contingent parts. Necessity acts on that which is contingent, and that which is contingent acts on necessity. In a word, insofar as absolute-ness, which is not abstract, empty totality, but a concrete, full totality, it is neither simply necessary nor simply contingent. It is “necessary-contingent” that takes its meaning from its reciprocal relationship with what is contingent and what is necessary. (KSZ 2: 241)

This passage gives us a good idea of just what Kuki meant by “the absolute.” It is, first, a whole that embraces the full range of possibilities for each individual being. Second, the whole needs its parts to acquire its full, concrete meaning; otherwise, it remains empty and abstract. Third, it has a determining reciprocal relationship with each of its parts, so that both the whole and its parts exert mutual influence over each other. Fourth, it is therefore “necessary-contingent.”

We noted above that individuals were defined as disjunctive (at once separate and in touch). To this we may now add that for Kuki individuals separate themselves from the whole but remain in touch with it in the sense that they are included in it. This can be clarified in terms of the paradigm of the containing and the contained.

What is at issue here is the entirety of possibilities open to each being. We have already noted that, for Kuki, someone could just as well have been born in another country or as another life form. It is only a matter of chance or accident that one is born in a particular place as a human being. As he observes elsewhere, the temporality of what is possible belongs to the future, so that it is equally possible for someone who is to be born in one country rather than another, or even in a non-human form (KSZ 2: 207). In other words, the whole contains two types of possibility: possibilities that could have been possible in the past and possibilities that will be possible in the future. Accordingly, the whole is not accomplished or finished. It is in-the-making, a process constantly taking on new parts. In other words, the whole is progressively concretized at each moment through individual beings who appear and will continue to

appear. Kuki's idea of the absolute, we might say, approaches the notion of the natural world itself.

As a point of cultural reference, does Kuki understand the “whole” to be the Christian God? In his texts on contingency, the inspiration of numerous Western, especially German, philosophers on the development of his reasoning is evident, but he rarely uses the Christian term “God” (神) to which the absolute refers implicitly in the work of those philosophers. Rather, Kuki limits himself to the more neutral term “the metaphysical absolute”(形而上的絶対者) without either affirming or denying a connection to the Christian God.¹¹

Examples of the metaphysical absolute depend on the context. At one moment he speaks of Schelling's “primal contingency” (*Urzufall*)¹² or of “absolute necessity” in the sense of that which contains in itself the cause of being. At another he writes that “it is also possible to consider the Supreme Ultimate (太極) of the *Book of Changes* as the metaphysical absolute” (KSZ 2: 239). Yet again, in the conclusion to *The Problem of Contingency*, Kuki cites a passage from Vasubandu:

Once someone has contemplated the power of the original vows of the Buddha, that person's encounters never occur in vain. (KSZ 2: 259)¹³

Clearly, for Kuki the Buddha, and in particular the Buddha Amida of the

11. He also left another text about the Christian God:

私の考えている神とは人間の行為を傍観して人間に賞罰を與えるような神ではない。人間全體と共に悲しみ人間全體と共に喜ぶ神、人間全體の中に住む神、人間即神である。神の性格は無限の愛でなければならない。

The God I am thinking about does not observe humanity's acts from afar and then decide to condemn or reward them. It is rather a God who suffers alongside humans and rejoices with all of humanity, a God who is within all humanity, the God of a humanity-in-God. The nature of God must be infinite love. (KSZ 3: 102)

12. In Schelling's *Philosophie der Mythologie und Offenbarung*, the fall of humanity into the sense world marked the beginning of human history and this was the primal contingency. Kuki gave numerous classes in Western philosophy at the university of Kyoto from 1929 until his death in 1941 and left notebooks that were published after his death. His explanations of Schelling's thought can be found in KSZ 7: 217–70.

13. 觀佛本願力 遇無空過者。The passage comes from 淨土論 [Treatise on the Pure Land], T. 26, No. 1254, 231.

Pure Land tradition, can also serve as an example of the metaphysical absolute.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we may summarize the essential points concerning human beings and the absolute.

The human being is defined by Kuki as:

- ◆ a partial being that never coincides with the whole but that contains it (this was the very definition of contingent being in Kuki's metaphysical sense);
- ◆ a being that is both separate from the whole but in touch with it;
- ◆ one of the various forms of living beings, although the fact of being born in human form is an infinitely rare and precious stroke of good fortune; and
- ◆ an authentic being (*jitsuzon*) in the sense that the human person consciously decides on its essence by itself—in other words, the way of living at every present moment in the life of an individual determines that person's future;

The absolute is defined as:

- ◆ the whole containing all its constituent parts, so that it is both concrete and full;
- ◆ all the possibilities that could have been in an individual's past and all of those that might be in an individual's future;
- ◆ in the process of becoming and as such close to the notion of the natural world;
- ◆ in need of its parts in order to avoid being abstract and empty, and as such simultaneously necessary and contingent; and
- ◆ represented by the "metaphysical absolute" of the Western philosophical tradition, the Supreme Ultimate of the *Book of Changes*, and Buddha Amida.

In the relationship between humanity and the absolute:

- ◆ humanity (or individual humans) are contained in the absolute, so

that humanity and the absolute are reciprocally determined. Consequently, there is a relationship of interdependence.

Concerning the relationship between an individual's essence and the universal essence, which was Kuki's central question, I believe that his intention in using the three figures of the absolute was to show that he was not interested in favoring one expression of the absolute among the many but in showing the universal aspect that is enriched and will continue to be enriched over time as individual essences are multiplied.

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