BOOK REVIEWS

THE SOCIAL SELF IN ZEN AND AMERICAN PRAGMATISM. By Steve Odin. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 482, with notes, glossary, references, index. ISBN 0 7914 2492 8 (PBK)

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STEVE ODIN'S PROPOSAL that a social self is a key idea for East-West comparative philosophy is insightful and potentially promising. He singles out George Herbert Mead's idea of a social self based on "the notion of linguistically mediated symbolic interaction between the individual and society" (p. 18) as an important contribution to comparative philosophical anthropology. I also believe that the concept of a social self is important and should be explored further.

The potential significance of a social self, described by Mead as a dialectical relationship between "I" and "me" through symbolic interaction, should be carefully assessed. Mead's "I" and "me" seem to tacitly presuppose a distinction between the individual and society, or between subject and object, although he maintains that individual and society co-arise together. "I" is the element of spontaneity and novelty, while "me" represents the attitude of the whole community. In other words, Mead's ideas of "I" and "me" themselves are ambiguous as key concepts of comparative philosophy and theology.

Odin's main interest does not lie in how we can understand better the different ideas of self in different cultures, but rather he emphasizes the formal convergence of these ideas using Mead's "I" and "me" as a touchstone. This becomes obvious when he criticizes *nihonjinron* (the theory of Japanese identity) scholarship in his Introduction (pp. 41–44). I also believe that *nihonjinron* scholarship is one-sided, but nevertheless it is not irrelevant for the consideration of the nature of a social self. We can learn much about the nature of social self by critically appropriating from *nihonjinron* scholarship. Actually Odin himself uses and explains a great deal of data from this scholarship.

Thus Odin's book has a deep ambiguity in itself, and he seems to be neither aware of it nor able to deal with it squarely. Even if he is aware of this ambiguity, this does not come to the fore in his arguments. Odin quotes Mead's

words: "Any self is a social self" (pp. 137 and 198). This means that the idea of self is a social construction through symbolic interaction. Different cultures and languages may have different ideas of self. There is no literal description about the self which can be applied cross-culturally. Is it not the case that we should carefully investigate the nature of both "I" and "me" through an analysis of the symbolic interactions within a particular language and discourse? Instead, Odin starts from Mead's dialectical bipolar self of "I" and "me" and tries to explain the data from this bipolar self. Thus, he neither fully illuminates why a social self is important nor how a social self is significant for comparative philosophy and theology. For instance, Mead's "generalized other" can be used to interpret both universalism as the final community of interpretation (objectivity in Mead's sense), and pluralistic explanations of the social self within the discourse (a particular language) of a particular society through symbolic interactions.

After a lengthy Introduction, the book consists of three parts. Part I describes the social self in modern Japanese philosophy. In this part, Watsuji Tetsurō, Nishida Kitarō, Doi Takeo and others' ideas of a social self which are well known to Japanese readers are introduced to the English speaking world. I found that his exposition of Nishida's idea is less satisfactory than his analysis of the other modern Japanese philosophers. I am not blaming Odin because Nishida is difficult to understand and there are many interpretations about him. Part II deals with the ideas of a social self in American philosophy. In it he traces the origin of the idea of social self in classical American pragmatists starting from Charles Peirce and William James. After introducing many thinkers he singles out the importance of the thought of G. H. Mead as the final synthesizer in this tradition. Part III compares the social self of Mead with the social self as it appeared in the modern Japanese philosophers. This part includes interesting comparative studies between Mead's bipolar self of "I"/"Me", Confucian "*yi*"/"*li*," and Japanese "***honne***"/"***tatemae***." In the last chapter of Part III, Odin skillfully places various intersubjective thinkers within the larger scope of twentieth century philosophical anthropology.

The book has more than 400 pages, and there are many thinkers and topics too complex to summarize here. Nevertheless, readers may feel that many of the arguments and explanations are somewhat repetitive and consist of a series of summaries rather than a sustained argument. Tighter argument and less data might have made the book much smaller and more effective. Since the book contains an enormous amount of data, it could be useful for a variety of purposes. Readers should be careful, however, as the way he reads some of the Japanese terms is not always accurate. In the following I would like to comment on a few specific points.

Let's go back to the Introduction. Here Odin explains his thesis: "I propose that the closest parallel to the 'true self' of Zen is Mead's concept of the 'social self' " (p. 24). Although he uses mainly Ueda's article[1] on the *Ten Oxherding Pictures* to substantiate his claim that the true self of Zen is a social self, it is not clear to me why Ueda's argument is directly connected with Mead's idea of a social self. If Mead's idea of the generalized other is equated with Zen's true self, there seems to be a contradiction. For Mead's immanent transcendence (interpreted rather differently from Nishida and meaning thisworldly without any transcendence in Mead) is externally directed, trying to find the ideal community of interpretation. Nishida emphasizes, however, that one ought not to try to find the ideal self externally (or reflexively in common parlance) but rather internally, thus immanent transcendence. The true self can be found by mutual self-negation. True self is with us always, according to Nishida, at the bottom of absolute nothingness. It is not to be found as a limiting concept so to speak (as external transcendence) as a generalized other. Anything can become an occasion or a clue to find this enlightenment in Zen. In other words, in Mead we cannot find any discontinuity. I believe that Mead's novelty and Zen's enlightenment should be carefully compared rather than simply emphasizing similarities.

Nishida's article "*Ware to nanji*" ("I and Thou," 1932) is usually considered as a transitional stage in his own development from his logic of place to his final stage of philosophy, that is to say, the dialectical Universal. Nishida took this idea of "I and Thou" not from Martin Buber but from the theologian Friedrich Gogarten. Odin interprets that both Nishida and Buber independently took the idea from Feuerbach (pp. 30–31). But Nishida's article "*Ware to nanji*" does not refer to Feuerbach. The name Feuerbach first appeared when he wrote his general introduction (which actually appeared as summary and conclusion because Nishida said that it became too long) to his *Fundamental Problems of Philosophy* (1933). Nishida says that this book was written in order to develop further the idea expressed in "*Ware to nanji.*" As a general philosophical genealogy, Odin may be right when he says Buber in the West and Nishida in the East derived the idea of "I and Thou" from Feuerbach independently. But since Gogarten perhaps took the idea from Buber, and Nishida took it from Gogarten, the actual sequence of influences seems to be derived from Buber. Here I will not go into detail but "I and Thou" of Nishida is subtly different from that of Buber. Briefly speaking, Nishida's "I and Thou" is deeply related to his idea of immanent transcendence, while Buber's "I and Thou" is a modification of Kantian ethics.

[1] Ueda Shizuteru, "Emptiness and Fullness: Śūnyata in Mahāyāna Buddhism," *The Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1982), pp. 9–37.

A social self is still a concept. Perhaps we will never be able to find a literal expression for a social self because the true self is difficult to express by a concept. Only a metaphor is adequate to express a self. In this sense, Odin is right to call our attention to the importance of H. Richard Niebuhr's contribution to the idea of a social self expressed in his book *The Responsible Self* (pp. 413–415). Here Odin recognizes that H. R. Niebuhr reinterprets Christian ethics using a new metaphor of responsibility.

Metaphor is the most appropriate means to express intersubjectivity of self/other (a social self). Semiotically speaking, I believe there is a tendency in the West to think that individuals make up a society (external transcendence), while in Japan, within society the individual is born. One tends to encourage subject/object distinction (individuals in relation) and the other tends to negate subject/object distinction (place as a metaphor of self; Doi's *amae* should be interpreted in this context). Nishida states in his important essay, "Basho" ("Place," 1926):

> Usually "I" is considered as the unity of the subject that has various qualities just as a thing. However, "I" is not the unity of the subject but should be the unity of the predicate. *"I" is not a point but should be a circle, not a thing but a place.* The reason why the self cannot know itself is that the predicate cannot become the subject.[2]

Although Nishida does not forget the importance of the individual through the influence of Western philosophy, his understanding of the notion of the individual is different from Western individualism. This is because his thinking is influenced by the Buddhist understanding of self. Mead's idea of symbolic interactions of "I" and "me" should be carefully assessed under the metaphorical understanding of self which is deeply influenced by a particular culture and language. Odin's book does not give us a critical evaluation of Mead's idea but rather accepts him as a creative synthesizer of American pragmatists. More careful analysis of language and discourse is necessary for assessing Mead's "I" and "me." For instance, the following observation of Thomas Kasulis about the Japanese language helps illuminate the nature of a social self. He observes the difference between English and Japanese as follows:

> There is an important distinction to be made between the way Westerners and Japanese see the function of language. Suppose we represent interpersonal communication as *aRb*, where *a* and *b* are

[2] Nishida Kitarō, *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1979), vol. 4, p. 279. Translation and emphasis are mine.

> persons and *R* is the linguistic medium through which they communicate. Western view typically regards *a* and *b* as two transmitters, each emitting signals to be received and interpreted by the other. In English, for example, we speak of language as a bridge spanning the gap between *I* and *You*. The isolated *a* and *b* together create *R* so that communication can take place. In Japan, however, the event is viewed quite differently: the *R* is primary. The *R* is the given out of which *a* and *b* take their shape. Accordingly, *although the Japanese language does not lack personal pronouns, it is generally considered improper or even impolite to use them except when absolutely necessary for comprehension. In this regard, they are often used almost like proper nouns rather than pronouns in our sense.* Thus the conscious bifurcation between *I* and *You* is diminished.[3]

The difference may be exaggerated (Odin may see in this the typical *nihonjinron* thesis) but the point is well taken. Kasulis's observation and insight can be justified by the Japanese use of person-designating terms. Language and the mode of communication are inseparable. Actual human communication takes place in a particular context, and a relation arises in that context. Since the mode of communication seems to indicate the degree of intimacy within the social group, certain aspects of language may be related to the social structure of the particular language users. Kasulis indicates that the Western mode of communication presupposes a self/other distinction. On the other hand, in the Japanese mode of communication, a self/other distinction is not emphasized, or the quality of the self/other distinction is hierarchical. Of course, these insights are a matter of degree. As Japan becomes increasingly westernized, the mode of communication may change. Historically speaking, however, the observation of Kasulis seems to be justified.

Having said this, we should be grateful for Odin's enormous efforts to call our attention to the importance of the social self for comparative philosophy and theology, because "any self is a social self."

[3] Thomas P. Kasulis, *Zen Action/Zen Person* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii Press, 1981), p. 7. Emphasis mine.