

What Does Doing Philosophy Mean to Me?

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Translated by Robert Chapeskie

*This is an English translation of a slightly modified version of my Japanese essay “What Does Doing Philosophy Mean to Me?,” which was published in the August issue of *Contemporary Thought* (Special Feature: How Philosophy is Made).¹ It offers insight not only into my way of thinking about philosophy but also into the world of contemporary Japanese philosophy.

1. Disappointment with University Philosophy

To me, philosophy is the relentless pursuit of 1) how I am to live and die from this moment forward and 2) the meaning of my having been born. This pursuit does not stop until I reach an understanding that satisfies me. If I expand my field of view slightly, it is to understand where humanity came from and where it is going through an intellectual lens. When I entered the ethics program at the University of Tokyo, I thought I could do this sort of thing at a university. This expectation, however, was utterly betrayed. The study of philosophy at Japanese universities in the 1980s was mainly the study of writings by Western philosophers. What was undertaken in the ethics program and neighboring philosophy program was the close reading and interpretation of detailed elements of texts by great philosophers, always in the original language, and this was considered to be philosophy and ethics. I strongly opposed this even as I entered graduate school, and my first presentation given to the Japanese Society for Ethics when I was a graduate student was a critique of this organization. I thought this presentation, “Three Syndromes Making Current Japanese Philosophy Dull and Uninteresting,” would have a strong impact on the society, but in fact there was

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almost no reaction. After writing several papers for the journals of multiple academic associations, I then turned my back on such organizations and made the world of commercially published books the venue for my activities.

In this essay, I will not discuss my ups and downs since then in detail. Instead, I will present my relationship with philosophy divided into three topics. In this special feature in *Contemporary Thought*, senior philosophers such as myself are presumably to discuss “How I have lived in the world of philosophy,” and I will do so now. I am well aware that such an undertaking is not looked on favorably by young philosophers, but I will proceed with it nevertheless. I do so because to me philosophy is nothing other than closely examining one’s own life, and in doing so revising one’s own interaction with the world and other people. I call this method “life studies.”

2. My Death, Life Studies, and “Frigid Men”

I have written about this episode many times before, but as it is very important to me I would like to begin this essay by recounting it once more. One day, when I was around ten years old, I was struck by the question, “What will happen to me when I die?” This then expanded into the question, “What will happen to this universe when I die? Will it go on existing without me?” An image of perfect nothingness transfixed me. I felt the fear of death. In this moment I became a philosopher, or, more accurately, I was forced to become a philosopher. Until that point in time I had lived in the happy world of children. From then on, however, I became someone unable to forget the conceptual problem of my death even for a moment. Ever since then I have had the urgent feeling that I cannot die without being given a satisfactory answer to this question.

This is the type of philosopher I am, so in fact I don’t know much about other types of philosophers. This question I am facing is the only one I want to resolve. Of course, this inevitably develops into other questions and the themes I must examine thus expand without limit, but this question is at the root of my inquiry. For me philosophy is an effort to find an acceptable answer to this question that pierced my mind. Fundamentally, therefore, I do philosophy only for myself. To achieve my aim, however, I must draw on the work of others, both those active today and in the past, and move forward in tandem. I want like-minded people to support each other from afar in this work of excavating that tends to be lonely.

When I think about “my death,” to begin with I am faced with the question of

who exactly is dying. The one who is dying here is not “I in general,” of whom there are many all around me, but “this I who exists in a special form of which there is only one in entire universe.” But what is that? A ray of light was shone on this question that had captivated me since I was young by *The Upanishads*, which I read in the University of Tokyo’s library. I felt that the phrase “You are that!” in this text was an adage that hit upon the essence of “this I who exists in a special form of which there is only one in entire universe.” Forty years later I was able to put what I learned from *The Upanishads* into words in “The Immortal, Transmigrating Ātman (Self),” Chapter 4 of *Is It Better Never to Have Been Born?* (Chikuma Shobō, 2020, in Japanese). Since then, through a debate with Hitoshi Nagai, I have been developing this idea into the concept of “solipsistic penetration” (Chapter 5 “Solipsity that Opens Up through Penetration” in Hitoshi Nagai and Masahiro Morioka, *Confrontation Regarding “I”* (Akashi Shoten, 2022, in Japanese)).

The intuition that “my death” can only be properly examined in the dimension of solipsity lead me to the idea of life studies. Life studies is a method of inquiry in which the person doing the studying is never excluded or disconnected from what is being studied. It is a methodology in which I consider a particular problem while always including within my field of view how “this I” is involved in the problem in question and is going to be involved in it going forward. In life studies, academic inquiry is directly connected to my way of life. I think of life studies as a methodological form of inquiry like Phenomenology. This is an approach that should mature into a method of acquiring knowledge that transcends philosophy and is applicable to various domains of inquiry.

Most scholars discuss ethical and social issues while keeping themselves outside the frame of what is being considered, but life studies rejects this approach. Before talking about others, I must consider what exactly is going on in my own case. This is my starting point. I introduced the term “life studies” in my first book, *An Invitation to Life Studies* (Keiso Shobō, 1988, in Japanese). It was then fully developed in *How to Live in a Post-Religious Age* (Hōzōkan, 1996, in Japanese) and *Confessions of a Frigid Man* (complete edition Chikuma Bunko, 2013, original 2005, in Japanese. For an English translation see Morioka [2017]).

Confessions of a Frigid Man was received as a men’s studies text that unflinchingly excavates male sexuality. In bookstores it is often put in the gender section. But this book is a work of life studies that never stops considering the self, and a philosophical attempt to determine how I am to live my one and only

life. Readers with a background in philosophy will presumably perceive it in this way. In *Confessions of a Frigid Man* I reject speaking of male sexuality in general. Instead, I discuss what kind of sexuality I myself have lived and to what sort of places this sexuality has driven me. I talk about my existence being threatened by a post-ejaculation feeling of emptiness, trying to avoid confronting this anguish, and being captivated by the delusion that somewhere there is a world of wondrous pleasure that offers something different. I also relate being sexually attracted to school uniforms and my desire to ejaculate on the institution of “school” itself.

I also talk about having a “Lolita complex” of being sexually attracted to the bodies of young girls, and the idea that behind this lies regret at having taken the male path at the fork in the road of pubescence. I conclude that my Lolita complex is nothing other than the unrealizable desire to go back in time to the age when the paths of men and women diverge and try taking the other path and living as a girl from the inside. This was a desire to become a teenage girl and relive my life again as the opposite gender. This is different from cross-dressing; I don’t want to wear women’s clothing, I want to wear a teenage girl’s *body*. Bringing this sexuality that had been submerged within me to light allowed me to experience a minor rebirth. I write about this in the afterword to the paperback edition of this book (2013). Phenomena that emerged after its publication, such as men who are fond of using drawings or photographs of girls as their profile icons on twitter or men who become beautiful girl “VTubers (美バク肉),” suggest that this desire to wear a girl’s body is widespread in Japanese society.

Confessions of a Frigid Man was written using the “confessional method,” one of the methods of life studies. It is also a book that asks the reader what they think about their own sexuality. The posing of this question is made meaningful by my having spoken so frankly about my own case. This extremeness may seem to preclude this text from being discussed in philosophical academia or in philosophy courses, but in fact it falls squarely within the “philosophy of sex.” (Regarding this branch of philosophy, see *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Sex and Sexuality* (2022). The same method is also used to discuss the Aum Shinrikyō incident in my *How to Live in a Post-Religious Age*). Speaking in terms of the topic of this special feature, “how philosophy is made,” the “confessional method” of life studies employed in *Confessions of a Frigid Man* can indeed be considered one of the orthodox schools of “making philosophy.” It is, after all, a style of philosophy that goes all the way back to Augustine.

3. Painless Civilization Theory

My philosophical interest has been directed toward my own life and existence, but it has not stopped there; I have also focused on where humanity came from and where it is going. This interest grew out of a question that caused me much anguish in my twenties and thirties. I do my best to avoid pain and seek pleasure, so why am I not happy? Why do I instead find myself being swallowed by an anxiety that feels like drowning in a sea of sugar? I came to believe this was related to a difficult question of bioethics I was studying at the time. Through advances in technology, it had become possible to check the chromosomes of fertilized eggs produced through in-vitro fertilization, discard the fertilized egg if a congenital disability was discovered, and only implant in the womb and eventually give birth when no potential disability was found. This is a form of new eugenics, but from a philosophical perspective it can also be described as technology that preventively eliminates something you want to avoid or don't want to happen in the future. Such undertakings can be seen not only in reproductive technologies but throughout modern society. This is most typically manifested in technology for managing the natural environment and preventive medicine. I called this "preventive pain elimination." Preventive pain elimination is closely connected to the self-domestication of humanity. Humanity has domesticated wild animals and made them into tools suited to our needs, but the same thing has also been done regarding human beings ourselves. One of the means by which this has been done is preventive pain elimination. The idea of the self-domestication of humanity came out of the anthropology of the 20th century. I developed it further and came up with the concept of "painless civilization." Humanity began heading toward painless civilization when it created a civilization of agriculture and livestock farming at the dawn of history. In the 19th century, science, industrial societies, and capitalism became the driving forces in civilization, further advancing the elimination of pain. Today's developed countries are indeed rushing headlong toward painless civilization.

Painless civilization is a kind of civilization in which systems of avoiding pain and suffering and pursuing pleasure and comfort have been put in place in every corner of society. Preventive pain elimination is one of the systems that pushes painless civilization forward. While at first glance painless civilization may seem humanity's ideal civilization, in fact it deprives human beings of the possibility

of fundamental joy and turns them into living corpses. We who have adapted our lives to painless civilization are aware that our chance at true joy is being taken away. But it is not so easy for us to escape. We keep looking for reasons it is not necessary for us to get away from painless civilization, and tell ourselves that staying in such a civilization is fine and there is no need to escape. Fueled by such thoughts and actions, painless civilization swells even further. I too am caught up in painless civilization. Nightmarish self-referentiality in which exposing the systems of painless civilization itself contributes to the development of painless civilization is indeed the essential quality of this civilization. In *Painless Civilization* (Transview, 2003, For an English translation of Chapter One, see Morioka [2021a]) I present several other important concepts, such as “dual-management structures,” “the desire of the body and the desire of life,” and “pain elimination devices and their dismantling.” The book ends without feeling complete, but many readers consider it my most significant work.

This is a work of philosophy, but there has been very little consideration of painless civilization theory in philosophical academia. Professional philosophers seem to have no interest in it. One reason for this is that current Japanese philosophy has lost interest in large narratives that attempt to explain society as a whole. Another is that civilization theory as a field of inquiry has been driven outside the domain of philosophical thought. In the past, movements such as Marxist thought, the cultural anthropology of thinkers like Levi-Strauss, and the civilization studies of Japanese scholars such as Kinji Imanishi and Tadao Umesao were also discussed in the world of philosophy. That era is over. Today, in addition to the study of individual Western philosophers, the main interest of Japanese philosophy is disciplines such as analytic philosophy, analytic ethics, and analytic aesthetics. This is precisely the opposite orientation to the kind of integration found in civilization studies. Of course, these fields of inquiry are also quite interesting, so I myself have written papers in these domains, but I would object to the suggestion that this is all that should properly be considered philosophy. I would object for the same reason I did when I was told “the study of philosophers is philosophy.” I believe philosophy must not discard the kind of integration found in civilization studies.

As a result, for me the second element in how philosophy is made involves addressing the question of where humanity came from and where it is going by engaging in civilization studies-style integrative thought from an original perspective. *Painless Civilization* stops before reaching a conclusion, so I plan to

write a follow-up volume. I would also like to bring painless civilization theory into the philosophical discourse. To this end I must find philosophers and scholars with an active interest in this approach. The world's march toward painlessness has progressed in the twenty years since I wrote this book. The opioid crisis in US society is a crisis caused by the pursuit of painlessness. Last year (2021) an English translation of the first chapter of *Painless Civilization* was released as an open access publication on the Internet. A Turkish translation based on this English text was then published in print. I suspect there are many people around the world who are hungry for philosophy equipped with a civilizational perspective.

4. Philosophical Academia, Philosophy of Life's Meaning, and Birth Affirmation

After publishing *Painless Civilization* in 2003, I felt as though I had run into a dead end. I had written this book using the methodology of life studies, but I realized it would be difficult to cool-headedly and objectively discuss complex philosophical problems relying only on such dramatic methods. In other words, I came to believe two kinds of philosophical methods were necessary: the methodology of life studies in which I myself am never pushed out of the frame, and the methodology of academic philosophy in which I put myself to one side for the moment and closely examine problems on their own terms. This is by no means a rejection of the methodology of life studies. The life studies approach and the academic approach are two wheels on a cart. Both are necessary.

This is why I returned to academia after having at one point abandoned it. After two decades of working outside academia, by reading the latest academic journals and attending conferences I gradually rehabilitated myself. Eventually I completed a Ph.D. thesis on the philosophy of brain death.

What I sought in academic philosophy was a “philosophy of life” in which life is given comprehensive philosophical examination. Such a domain, however, did not exist in philosophical academia. Prominent encyclopedias, such as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, for example, contain no such entry. Wikipedia has a page on this topic but there is almost no content. Similar sounding domains such as “philosophie de la vie / Lebensphilosophie” and “philosophy of biology” can be found, but the former is limited to the study of European philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries, while the latter is a field that concerns

itself with the science of biology. The fact that in academia there is no domain of philosophy that comprehensively considers the life both of human beings and other biological creatures is shocking. And in the English-speaking world there was no journal targeting such a field.

I therefore decided to begin by founding a peer-reviewed English language journal with contributions focusing on the philosophy of life. With the help of some friends, I launched *Journal of Philosophy of Life* on the Internet in 2011. All published articles were made available for open access download from a university library repository. We decided not to charge an open access fee to authors. At first there were many things I didn't know and a lot of trial and error, but ten years have passed and today the operation is stable. Through the process of running this journal, I learned that a new "philosophy of life's meaning" field had emerged in the world of English language philosophy. It philosophically examines questions such as what do people live for, is there meaning in life, and what gives meaning to life. This field had neither international conferences nor its own academic journals. I reached out to one of its leading figures, the University of Pretoria's Thaddeus Metz, and in 2015 the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* published a special feature on one of his books. Right around this time Hokkaido University's Nobuo Kurata began working in this field, so I joined his research group. Then in 2018 the first "International Conference on Philosophy and Meaning in Life" was held at the University of Hokkaido with Kurata as its chairperson. This international conference was the first full-fledged, open academic conference held in this domain, and since then, while changing organizers, it has been held at Waseda University, the University of Birmingham, and the University of Pretoria. Next year the fifth conference will be held at Tohoku University. Recognition has grown among those with an interest in the field, and there are many presenters from all over the world. *Journal of Philosophy of Life* is the current venue for the results of this academic conference to be published as refereed papers.

Various things occurred to me in the midst of returning to philosophical academia and having these experiences. First, open access (downloadable by anyone free of charge) is the ideal form of publishing for philosophical papers. But I think the current publication system of open-access papers through the English-language journals of prestigious academic publishers should perish, because they charge the author a ridiculously expensive fee. A new system for publishing peer-reviewed academic journals needs to be put in place

internationally. *Journal of Philosophy of Life* has a narrow focus, and its papers have already gone through a conference presentation, so it can operate with volunteer editors and reviewers and university research funds.

I also believe that the Japanese philosophical community focuses too much on how to respond to trends in the English, French, and German-speaking worlds and not enough on the ideas put forward by Japanese speakers. This is a longstanding weakness of Japanese philosophical academia, and it remains unreformed. We already have the original philosophy of Shōzō Ōmori, for example, but Japanese philosophers have not engaged in the collective work of developing his thought through constructive criticism to create a new paradigm of philosophy. And what do academic philosophers think of the work of Mitsu Tanaka, which has served as a wellspring of contemporary Japanese feminist thought? (Have male philosophers even read it?). Why hasn't philosophical academia elevated, through constructive criticism, the work of Hitoshi Nagai and Motoyoshi Irifuji, in which they construct a novel metaphysics in Japanese, to a major trend in the contemporary era? I know some attempts have been made by academic associations, but they have only ever been sporadic. It seems Japanese philosophical academia does not seriously believe the next innovative school of philosophy could come from today's Japanese philosophers.

With these circumstances in mind, recently I have begun to switch my approach toward publishing the results of my academic work in English. The original concepts I am currently putting forward in academic philosophy are "birth affirmation" and "animated persona." The former is the affirmation of one's own birth, that is, to say "I am truly glad to have been born," and I propose analyzing it using the possible world interpretation and the anti-antinatalistic interpretation (See Morioka [2021b], [2021e], and [2022]). The latter is a concept I proposed as a phenomenological mechanism that makes it possible for a person who is brain dead to seem truly alive in the eyes of their family, allows us to vividly sense the presence of a person who has died in our daily lives, and enables us to perceive a robot as being just like a living person (See Morioka [2021d]). This has received a positive response from people overseas, so I would like to develop it further. The philosophy of antinatalism has attracted a lot of attention recently, as is reflected in the special feature in the November 2019 edition of *Contemporary Thought*, and I wrote a paper examining it comprehensively from three angles, the origins of this idea in ancient Greece, its origins in India, and the 20th century anti-procreationism movement (See Morioka [2021c]). This paper has become a

popular general overview of the subject.

My third point about how philosophy is made is this: when you have an original philosophical idea, it may well develop more fruitfully if you write about it in English and present it to the world from the start. You can directly interact with philosophers from Asia, Central and South America, Africa, and so on. The audience is overwhelmingly large. (Of course, it is also important to have a critical view of English-language imperialism. There is also the problem of being unable to have your work published in journals because the number of papers submitted in English-language philosophical academia is too great. Releasing one's own work through venues such as university repositories and setting up new open access journals on the Internet are thus approaches to be actively pursued.)

On the other hand, I have great hopes for Japanese commercial philosophy magazines such as *Contemporary Thought* and *Philosophy and Culture*. These magazines do not seem overly influenced by the authoritarianism of Japanese philosophical academia, and I think they have the adroitness to elevate new concepts and original methodologies that arise here in Japan going forward. It makes sense for commercial magazines to take on things that are difficult to do within Japanese philosophical academia. Presenting the results of one's efforts in book form is important in philosophy, so I think commercial magazines connecting with books to elevate philosophy created in Japan is a good allotment of resources. I would like to support this myself as much as I can. To be clear, I repeat that I am not criticizing the detailed study of Western philosophical thought itself. What I am criticizing is the view that the study of Western philosophical thought should unquestionably be considered the main subject of philosophy and the suppression of original Japanese philosophy this view engenders. In addition, the prejudicial view that "Western philosophy is philosophy" permeating university philosophy is another major problem. For example, the philosophy program at the University of Tokyo only covers Western philosophy, so it seems strange to call this a "philosophy" program. This is in fact a prejudice also held by the Western philosophical world itself. Most Western philosophers consider Asian philosophy to be something that merely resembles Western philosophy, and are reluctant to call it authentic philosophy in its own right. This is evinced by the fact that what they refer to as the "history of philosophy" is almost always merely the "history of Western philosophy." This is an antiquated way of thinking out of step with the 21st century.

Going forward I believe young people will turn Japanese philosophical

academia into something better. I have not touched on them in this essay, but it goes without saying that there are countless urgent issues that must be addressed, such as the problem of gender inequality in academic associations and graduate schools, the problem of teaching positions, and the problem of fixed-term employment. The culpability of my generation and previous generations who failed to change these realities is great.

In my work going forward I would like to engage both in life studies and in the academic philosophy of life. I suspect these two fields will always stand in contrast to each other, maintaining a tense relationship without ever being unified, but I think this dynamic tension itself has value. I hope to crystalize this in a major work tentatively entitled *Philosophy of Birth Affirmation*. This will be my second major work. As in the past, I plan to proceed in a manner of my own choosing.

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