

In Search of a Philosophy of Life in Contemporary Society: an Introduction

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In this paper I am going to talk about the “philosophy of life” project, which my colleagues and I have attempted over the last few years at our college. I believe research into the philosophy of life should contribute much to our discussion about many issues, such as democracy and war and peace in contemporary society. Before entering the main topic of this presentation, I would like to briefly introduce my academic background up until the present.

My first major was analytical philosophy, particularly the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, and I turned to bioethics and environmental ethics. I have published some Japanese books on bioethics in the late 1980s and early 90s, which were early examples of philosophical approaches to bioethics in Japan. Then I published a Japanese book and papers on brain death and organ transplants, which included a paper, “Reconsidering Brain Death,” (Morioka, 2001). Since then, my research has been extended to other areas such as criticism of contemporary civilization, gender studies, Japanese studies, and cultural studies.

Recently, Professor Christian Steineck of Frankfurt University, and I proposed a research on “philosophy of life,” which aims to combine a philosophical approach to contemporary issues in life, with a philological approach to ideas (philosophies) of life found in the writings of great philosophers in the past. We made a leaflet entitled, Proposal for the “Philosophy of Life” Project, in 2006, and distributed them informally.

Today is the age of nuclear war, environmental crisis, and technological intervention into human life. It is desperately needed to discuss “philosophy of life” against a background of radical changes of life situation. This should be an urgent mission for contemporary philosophers. However, surprisingly, there is no entry for “philosophy of life” in, for example, the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, or in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Of course, we have well-known French “philosophie de la vie” and German “Lebensphilosophie”, but these two usually mean a group of European philosophers in the 19th and 20th century. We have to widen our scope in terms of time and space when talking about philosophy of life in its broadest sense. And we have to keep in mind that in “philosophy of life,” the word “life” means not only human life, but also non-human life and nature, and furthermore, the relationship between them.

In English, the words “philosophy of life” might sound like a personal philosophical view of one’s own life. However, we want to redefine it as an academic research field that covers:

- 1) Cross-cultural, comparative, historical research on philosophies of life, death, and nature,
- 2) Philosophical investigations on contemporary problems surrounding human and non-human life, and
- 3) Theoretical discussions of “life” and “philosophy of life” itself.

The third, theoretical discussion, includes both: 1) the discussion of “life” such as “What is life?,” “What is death?,” “What is nature?,” and “What is the meaning of life and death?,” and 2) the discussion of “philosophy of life” such as “What is philosophy of life?,” “What can we talk in the name of “philosophy of life”?,” and “What should be the real subject of “philosophy of life”? When discussing these topics, contributions from philosophy of biology, existential philosophy, and philosophy of religion (and many other branches of philosophy) are highly required.

Since 2007, I have started a (very) small research group on philosophy of life, and have had 10 meetings at Osaka Prefecture University. The themes of discussion (2007-2008) included: 1) Philosophy of life found in the texts of great philosophers (Henri Bergson, Max Scheler, Hans Jonas, Ancient Greek philosophers, Ancient Chinese philosophers, Japanese medieval Buddhist, Shinran); 2) Theoretical questions (The idea of life. “What is life?,” What is “ageing”?, What is “philosophy of life”?); 3) Individual topics in philosophy of life (Issues in bioethics and social welfare, viewed from philosophy of life, problem of future generations).

Because we have just launched this project, we have not yet yielded fruitful results in the field of philosophy of life. However, we are hoping to found a firm basis on which to establish our “philosophy of life” project, and create a network of philosophers who are interested in this project in Japan and in the world. Historically speaking, this kind of serious speculation on life has been mostly attempted in religious communities. However, in our “philosophy of life” research, we should show tolerance toward all approaches inside and outside religious circles. (I am an agnostic, but I never exclude religious approaches.)

Here I would like to take three topics in philosophy of life, namely, “life extension”, “brain death” and “future generation”, and briefly illustrate the central points of the problems.

Life extension

“Life extension” is a newly emerging topic in philosophy of life, which was extensively discussed in the report of the USA President’s Council (2003), *Beyond Therapy*. This topic has been frequently discussed in bioethics since then. Liberal philosophers and trans-humanists tend to think that there is no problem with extending one’s healthy life as long as possible using (future) biotechnologies. Conservative philosophers think that extremely extended life, even if it is healthy one, will lead us to a miserable mental state dominated by adherence to anti-ageing and fear of death.

The problem of “life extension” cannot be fully discussed in the field of bioethics. It should be discussed in a more comprehensive framework, “philosophy of life”. The crucial point here is how to accept one’s own death in the age of life extension. We have to study various classical literatures in which the meaning of life and death was deeply discussed, and learn their philosophical discussions and wisdoms, and then again, come back to contemporary issues and tackle them.

Brain death

In Japan, the question “Is brain death human death?” is still fiercely debated. 50% think brain death means human death, 30% think it is not human death, and 20% could not decide. There is a considerable conflict of opinions among not only ordinary citizens but also in academia. We should know the following facts. The brain function of a brain dead person is believed to have stopped, however, in some cases, the heartbeat of a brain dead person can last more than a month, the longest was a period of 17 years. The arms and legs of a brain dead person frequently move. A brain dead female can give birth to a baby. A brain dead person is warm, sweats, and urinates. Sometimes, the parents of a brain dead child believe their child is alive in the state of brain death, and give devoted care at the bedside for more than a year.

Here we face the fundamental question, “What is human death, especially when it occurs to an intimate, loved one?” Those parents sometimes say that the life of their child exists in every part of the warm body, not in his/her dead brain. They see something more than a mere biological life there. This is a contemporary version of the fundamental question, “What is life?” and “What is death?”

Future generations

Professor Tetsuhiko Shinagawa (2008) pointed out in his book, *Bordering on Justice*, that a theory of justice cannot set a theoretical foundation for our obligation to reproduce future generations. This is because a theory of justice basically deals with just relationships among “existing” people. Of course, it can deal with just relationships between the current and future generations, but it doesn’t justify our “obligation” to reproduce future generations.

Theoretically, it might be OK for all people on earth to suddenly stop reproducing for some reason, and die naturally and happily. But intuitively, all of us would feel uneasy about this idea. The fundamental question here is: “Is there any specific reason why humans must not stop reproducing future generations?” Hans Jonas (1985) answered yes to this question, in his book, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, saying that

human survival must be the most fundamental imperative for humans. But is this a correct answer to that question?

Can we find a “philosophical foundation” for our obligation to reproduce future generations? This might be an important philosophical question when thinking philosophically about future generations in the age of war and environmental crisis. And this question has a close connection with the philosophy of life extension, because if extreme life extension and age retardation become possible in the future, we might be liberated from our responsibility or imperative to produce our children. But is this really correct? I believe this issue must be one of the most important topics in the field of philosophy of life in the contemporary age.

I hope to create a network of philosophers who are interested in “philosophy of life”. If you have an interest, please visit our website www.lifestudies.org and contact us.

References

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