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ZANGE AND SORGE: MODELS OF “CONCERN” IN COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

James Mark Shields

Terms such as “concern” and “care” would appear, at first glance, far too vague to be fit objects of serious philosophical treatment. And yet—whether framed in terms of love, charity, or compassion—such concepts are central to virtually all major religious worldviews and thus call for treatment by philosophy of religion. Moreover, with the existentialist and phenomenological movements, twentieth-century Western thought has frequently turned its attention to matters that “bear our attention.” The concept of *Sorge*, as developed in Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) classic work, *Being and Time* (1927), is one prominent example of such. Various rendered into English as “care,” “concern,” or “solicitude,” *Sorge* has been described as an existential-ontological state characterized by both “anxiety” about the future and the desire to “attend to” or “care for” the world, based on an awareness of temporality. In Heidegger’s terms, it is nothing less than the existential meaning of the Being of *Dasein*—i.e., of human existence itself (Heidegger, 1927, pp. 56–57; 1962, p. 83). And yet, for all its seeming significance, the concept of *Sorge* remains relatively underdeveloped in *Being and Time* and subsequent Western studies of Heidegger. At the same time, as I intend to show, the concept would come to play a significant role in the work of two important Japanese thinkers: Watusji Tetsurō (1889–1960) and Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), each of whom would, in his own unique way, critically develop and nuance Heidegger’s concept (Heidegger, 1927, pp. 41, 57; 1962, pp. 65, 83–84).

In what follows, I will analyze the concept of *Sorge* as developed and critiqued in the work of the above thinkers, with special attention given to the notion of care as both an ontological and ethical category and as a potential foundation for praxis. In addition to a theoretical analysis of these concepts, I will also touch upon the inescapable fact that each of these thinkers—in their own way—has been criticized for their role in supporting nationalist ideologies in early twentieth century Germany and Japan. In this regard, the materialist criticism of thinkers such as Tosaka Jun (1900–1945) will also be briefly discussed.

For Heidegger, *Sorge* is manifested in choices made by individuals in response to the possibilities recognized in other human beings, based on the uniqueness of these beings. There is or perhaps should be an element of disruption in this recognition, since for Heidegger authentic existence can only be found in a break with conventional beliefs and assumptions—a break from what he called the They (*das Man*) or they-self. As is expressed throughout *Being and Time*, ordinary humanity finds itself in a situation of fallenness (*Verfall*) or alienation, though this should be interpreted in a dialectical rather than strict lapsarian sense. That is to say, fallenness is in fact a necessary condition for Dasein's awakening to authenticity via *Sorge*—care or solicitude (Heidegger, 1927, pp.126–130; 1962, pp. 163–68). It is thus, in some sense, a form of existential *felix culpa*.

For those familiar with Buddhist thought, the non-temporal and transformational dialectic of *Sorge* bears resemblance to Mahāyāna tropes regarding the interplay or coalescence of ordinary, worldly-being (*samsāra*) and the state of awakening (*nirvāṇa*). This is especially evident in the following remark by Heidegger: “authentic existence is not something which floats above falling everydayness. Existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon” (see Steiner, 1989, pp. 97–98). Whereas Buddhists might prescribe meditation as the primary instrument with which to effect this “seizure,” for Heidegger it is *Sorge* that liberates us from what the tranquilizing busyness of ordinary existence or what he calls, using a familiar Buddhist terms in a non-Buddhist way: “the innocuous emptiness of a worldless occurring” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 179; 1962, p. 224). In short, while *Sorge* as solicitude might be conceived as a foundation for ethical activity in the world of other beings, it is, first and foremost, a recognition of and attunement towards Being itself. That is, it is a resolute openness to the transfigurative capacity of Being upon oneself and others. In this sense, *Sorge* seems reflective of the traditional Christian idea of radical conversion or *metanoia* in the face of God or the Ultimate. Think Paul on the road to Damascus.

In Japan, Heidegger's concept of *Sorge* was first borrowed and critically developed by Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), a philosopher who worked on the margins of the Kyoto School, Japan's most significant twentieth-century philosophical movement.

In *Ethics (Rinrigaku, 1937–1949)*, Watsuji argues that Heidegger's *Sorge* remains overly reliant on the philosophical structures of Western individualism and subjectivism, and thus neglects the social dimension of human being (or the *Mitsein* of *Dasein*). Although Heidegger aptly moves us away from the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* to an approach that might be summarized as *tutela ergo sum* (“I care, therefore I am”) the larger premise of subjectivity is not fundamentally challenged. In attempting to think Heidegger further, Watsuji contrasts Heidegger's being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*)

to the Japanese concepts *yōnonaka* and *seken* (“the public”) which signify not merely a spatiality of human relationships but also the temporality of such.

According to Watsuji, Heidegger erred in two distinct but related ways: (1) his ultimate commitment to the language and philosophical structures of individualism and consequent neglect of the social dimension of human being (or the *Mitsein* of *Dasein*) and (2) his privileging of time and the temporal over place and spatiality. Let us begin with the first point of criticism. Here Watsuji diverges from the standard poststructuralist criticism offered by Derrida and a few others, namely, that Heidegger was never able to free himself from the “logocentrism” of Western metaphysics, even as he managed to escape some of its other pitfalls. For Watsuji, it is not primarily in the pining for Being that Heidegger goes astray (this is a regrettable but understandable consequence of his rootedness in Western ontology or onto-theology), but in the very framework of this thought, where, in Cartesian/Kantian (or perhaps Nietzschean/Kierkegaardian) fashion, the primary relationship is between the “individual”—*Dasein*—and the non-human world (whether such is conceived as Nature, Being, or God).

Heidegger understood being-in-the-world in terms of the practical (or “ready-to-hand”) use of “tools,” and thus, for all his claims to have overthrown traditional metaphysical subjectivism, grounded his analysis in inescapably subjectivist language. “[T]he spatiality inherent in “a being there” is, in the final analysis, attributed to the relationship of concern between I and tools and has nothing to do with the relationship of communication among human beings” (Watsuji, 1996, p. 174).

Though tropes of “being-with” (*Mitsein*) and “Care” or “Concern” (*Sorge*) occur quite often in the Heideggerian corpus, these themes, according to Watsuji, remain relatively underdeveloped, and do not easily connect with Heidegger’s more general thesis about Being and Time. This point requires some elaboration. *Sorge*—in which the whole structure of *Dasein* is understood, in its threefold nature as *thrownness*, *fallenness*, and *possibility*, to be “ahead of itself in already being in the world as being alongside what it encounters in the world”—is interpreted by Heidegger primarily if not solely in terms of temporality, by way of anxiety and being-towards-death (Watsuji, 1996, p. 215). Thus *Sorge* ultimately lacks the sense of (embodied) compassion between human beings.

We should note that Watsuji neglects to mention that Heidegger does in fact deal with “place,” and in a quite novel way: in practical concern or *Sorge*, Heidegger argues, distance itself becomes degeometricized, and thus space becomes trans-spatial (for example, when speaking on the telephone, one’s interlocutor is “nearer” than the person in the next room, because she is part of one’s immediate “world”). Yet Watsuji is correct (and not the first to note) that this perspective, which would seem to open up the possibility of Care being manifest in terms of the space of neighborliness, is a path that

Heidegger deigns not to pursue. This may be because, in an obvious debt to Nietzsche (but also to Jaspers and perhaps even, somewhat ironically, to the Frankfurt School) Heidegger was intensely, almost obsessively wary of Mass Society or the Public—*das Man*. *Dasein*, after all, cannot be entirely an “I am” if it also has to be a “with-them.”

Thus a non-trivial tension arises between authentic *being-with* and inauthentic *being-with-Them*. It became clear to Heidegger that one of the lamentable symptoms of the modern age is precisely that “one’s own *Dasein* dissolves completely into the kind of being of ‘the Others’ . . .”—thus *das Man* emburdens authentic *being-in-the-world*. Though Care unifies *Dasein*, even Care must recognize the fallenness of man-as-They. For the Frankfurt thinkers and many existentialists, this situation of “alienation” requires nothing less than a (Kierkegaardian) leap into subjectivity, even if it is a leap without a sure foundation or goal.

But, again, Heidegger’s Care is not primarily an “ethical” modality; his use of this term, as with so many others, rids it of its conventional meaning. For Heidegger, this divestiture or deconstruction is a necessary step towards rediscovering the true meaning of terms; for others (such as Pierre Bourdieu) it is an emptying out of meaning with deep and disastrous implications on the philosophical and political level.

For Watsuji, however, the problem of subjectivity in Heidegger is made worse by an over-emphasis on temporality, a temporality that “fails to materialize in the form of historicity”—which is the concrete temporality of persons-in-community (Watsuji, 1996, p. 221). One’s thrownness is a burden, and the sense of repentance—of coming to terms with one’s past—is not at all evident in the Heideggerian concept. In attempting to think Heidegger further, Watsuji contrasts Heidegger’s *In-der-Welt-sein* to the Japanese concepts *yononaka* and *seken* (“the public”) which signify not merely a spatiality of human relationships but also their temporality and historicity. Moreover, Watsuji raises the problem of the key philosophical term *Sein* or Being. Within Western philosophy, Being plays the role of the ground of existence and of logic: it is the “A is A” (Fichte) and the “direct, undetermined ‘to be’” (Hegel) (Watsuji, 1996, p. 19). However, the grandeur, plenitude, and objectivity of Being limit its applicability in terms of ethics. Western Being must be re-evaluated in terms more familiar and applicable to the Japanese situation, and to the condition of sociality more generally. Watsuji suggests that the Japanese term *sonzai* (*son* = maintenance or subsistence against loss [time] + *zai* = remaining within relationships [space]) is a more appropriate term for describing “the subjective, practical, and dynamic structure of human being” (ibid., p. 21).

Thus, though Heidegger goes beyond the “contemplative approach” to human existence, which reached an apogee in the “transcendental phenomenology” of his mentor Edmund Husserl, his remarks on “concernful

dealings,” while opening up spatiality as the structure of subjective existence, ultimately confines such to the relation of human beings and tools, and effectively bypasses interpersonal relationships.

Watsuji’s contemporary, Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962) of the Kyoto School, developed an alternative theory of “concern” in his reflections on *zange*, especially as found in his magnum opus, *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (*Zange toshite no tetsugaku*, 1948). For Tanabe, *zange*, translated as “metanoesis” or “metanoetics” involves the intense recollection of one’s past sins, combined with the wish that these sins had not been committed. In short, it is a radical transformation that is at one and the same time a form of repentance—though this repentance takes place at the level of one’s entire being. At first glance, Tanabe’s formulation seems both radically subjectivist and distinctly Christian. However, like Watsuji, he attempts to situate “concern” within the context of society via a process of what he calls “absolute mediation,” the previously restricted self “surrenders” to its own self-criticism, and is thereby liberated to the point where it can truly engage with other beings. Also, like Watsuji, Tanabe self-consciously incorporates models of thought borrowed from Asian intellectual traditions, including Buddhism—especially the Pure Land traditions.

In addition, Tanabe’s focus on the self-as-agent/agency (*shutai*) over the self-as-contemplative consciousness (*shakun*), reflects his Marxist sympathies, as well as his general desire to bring ethics and history into the heart of modern Japanese thought. A prominent conception in postwar Japanese Marxism was the (Sartrean) notion that the “abyss” of nothingness must underlie the freedom of the acting subject in the historical world (see Katsumi, 1947). Likewise, Tanabe’s “subject” is first and foremost an agent, a subject-in-action or in-relation-with-others. Thus Tanabe would concur with Watsuji’s comment that “[t]he study of ethics is the study . . . of the subject as a practical, active connection” (*jissenteki kōiteki renkan*)” (Koschmann, 1996, p. 103).

The key terms in Tanabe’s formulation that distinguish his own work from that of the other major Japanese thinkers are the *logic of species*, *metanoesis*, and *absolute mediation*. For the purposes of this paper, I shall speak only of the last two, which are the most important tropes in *Philosophy as Metanoetics*.

As previously noted, metanoesis or *zange* entails a radical transformation or movement (the literal meaning of *metanoia*) linked to repentance. Crucial to Tanabe’s thesis is the fact that the *meta* of meta-noetics implies that such ultimately “surpasses the position of mere contemplation (*noesis*)” (Takeuchi, cited in Heisig, 1986, p. xlv). Yet what must also be noted is precisely the “after” aspect of meta-noesis, which is not meant to be anti-rational or irrational, that is, not an erasure or sublation of reason, logic, language, or criticism, but a way of pushing the critique of reason to its limits, a task, in

Tanabe's eyes, begun but left incomplete by Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger. In fact, Tanabe goes so far as to call his logic of metanoetics "absolute criticism."

Absolute criticism is nothing less than the existential involvement of the subject involved in the critical task, such that, faced with the "crisis of its own dilemma," the subject "surrenders" to its own self-criticism. This is not expressed by Tanabe in terms of the self's dissolution, but rather as the "breaking-through (*Durchbruch*) of a self that hitherto had moved exclusively within the realms of discursive thinking and reflection" (Tanabe, 1986, p. 4). Moreover, this is the point at which "absolute mediation" becomes involved: the "truth" of the absolute can only "function" in its relative mediation with the world of forms and relative beings. "In this sense, the transformation through vertical mediation between the absolute and the self (Thou and I) must also be realized in horizontal social relationships between my self and other selves (I and Thou)" (ibid., p. lviii). In other words, absolute mediation takes the form of mediation through other beings; "the effect of the absolute on the relative only becomes *real* as the effect of the relative on the relative." (ibid., p. 19, italics added).

Here we see an obvious parallel with Watsuji's concept of *aidagara* or "betweenness" as the ground for ethics and human being, and also with Heidegger's *Sorge* as a turn towards authenticity via an openness or answerability towards Being, which allows us to break through inauthenticity. Yet Tanabe moves further than either Watsuji or Heidegger towards a grounding in historical reality. For Tanabe, nothingness does not or cannot appear in itself but only through the medium of historical being.

"What determines the individual is always species as an historical, relative particular form of being. It is not some absolute negativity of nothingness apart from the movement of this relative negativity" (Koschmann, 1996, p. 118). Absolute mediation takes place only through the irruption of absolute nothingness into relative being. Using more distinctly Buddhist terms: [b]eing here is "being as upāya," [*hōbentiki-sonzai*] that is, being as a mediator of nothingness. Moreover, human existential self-awareness, which realizes the compassion and altruism of the bodhisattva through the equality of mutual transformation, must be a mediation of nothingness in the sense of just such a transformation of subjectivity (Tanabe, 1986, p. 109).

Thus, Tanabe concludes, *zange*—and only *zange*—is able to overcome, on the one hand, the problems of individualism that beset Western conceptions of freedom and, on the other, the lack of individual agency/ethics/this-worldliness of which Buddhism, and Zen in particular, is often (with some justification) accused.

In short, from the perspective of Japanese critics like Watsuji and Tanabe, Heidegger's rejection of the metaphysical "forgetting of Being,"

necessitated a turn from “ontic” (*ontisch*) to “ontological” (*ontologische*) thinking. This move, while effectively subverting the Cartesian and Kantian ego, also subverts the community of egos that make up the dominant Western conception of sociality. While this is, in some ways, a positive “deconstructive” move, Heidegger lacks the concepts or terms to allow for a rebirth of sociality out of emptiness or betweenness. In short, “man,” in becoming “the neighbor of Being,” loses touch with his neighbors who happen to be mere “beings.” For Watsuji, the result is not an overcoming of nihilism (which the Heideggerian project, in the wake of Nietzsche, claimed to be), but rather a nihilism *in extremis*.

As with many thinkers living and writing during the tumultuous decade leading up to the Second World War, the ideas of Heidegger, Watsuji and Tanabe have to be contextualized in light of the ideological currents and political realities of the 1930s and early 1940s. This critique extends to the connection between their ideas and the dominant (i.e., fascist or imperialist) ideologies of the day. The Case of Heidegger is well-known and need not be rehearsed here. During the 1930s and early 1940s, Watsuji felt compelled to concretize his philosophy in relation to the Imperial system of wartime Japan, effectively collapsing the tension between self and other into a merging of self with the “absolute totality” of the nation-family (see Odin, 1992, p. 491; Dale, 1986; Piovesana, 1969). It is perhaps more surprising that Tanabe, too, was drawn into this ideological web. Indeed, some of his statements during the early 1940s are, at least on face, more extreme than anything coming from Watsuji or Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945), the leading figure of the Kyoto School and Tanabe’s erstwhile mentor (see Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002, pp. 5, 253).

This is a complex issue that I cannot fully address here, yet I find myself persuaded by critic Karatani Kōjin, who makes the case that Tanabe, Watsuji and Nishida all fell prey to what Karatani calls the lure of “aesthetics.” Karatani uses Marxist critic Tosaka Jun, a contemporary of Tanabe, Watsuji, and Nishida, to argue that these thinkers were beholden to a romantic tradition of thought that emerged out of a post-Kantian formulation of aesthetics as a vehicle for the surmounting or unification of contradictions, such as “those between the personal and the communal and between the individual and the totalistic” (Karatani, 2005, p. 109). In this sense, aesthetics gives birth to absolutism and, in effect, paves the way for fascism—in thought if not in practice. To my mind, the tragedy here is that Watsuji and Tanabe recognize in their respective formulations of *aidagara* and *zange* the necessity of an oscillation between self and other, individual, and society. That is to say, the tendency in much of their best philosophical work is towards moderation, not extremism. Tanabe, in particular, was critical of the Nishidan tendency towards abstraction and the neglect of historical realities, tendencies he summed up with the blanket term “culturalism” (Tanabe, 1986, pp. 261–262).

And yet, like many others, Tanabe was unwilling or unable to fully ground his ideas in terms of what Harry Harootunian calls “the world of everyday space” (Harootunian, 2009, pp. 84–85; also pp. 93–105).