

Beyond the Rationalism of the Modern Era

—the 20th Century in Retrospect (Part I)

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Introduction

(1) The beginning of the final year of the second millennium offers an appropriate opportunity to weigh carefully what the 20th century has signified, by focusing our attention on the essence of the century. If a large number of future historians wrote that an epochal paradigm shift had started in the 20th century with the rationalism of the modern era coming to an end in its historical role, most people living in this century would certainly raise an objection. A reaction of this sort would eloquently prove the fact that people of today are still dominated in their principles of thinking and behavior by the paradigm of modern rationalism so overwhelmingly that, although celebrated European intellectuals warned from the late 19th century to the early 20th century that various problems, the danger of nihilism included, are inherent in modern rationalism,

most people of today are barely aware of the significance of the warning to that effect. This is not surprising, given the fact that the materialistic civilization they are fully enjoying at present was brought about for the first time by the modern science and technology that are the legitimate offspring of modern rationalism. We cannot, however, be oblivious to the fact that there has been a great deal of fundamental criticism against the axioms upon which modern rationalism bases itself.

(2) The most distinctive feature of modern rationalism is that the scope of objects which human reason can definitely perceive without recourse to physical organs limits itself basically to bodies (objects) as they are reduced to spatial extension and to the motions they conduct, since both the bodies and the motions can only

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Modern Rationalism and Its Limitations for Japanese

By Kida Gen

I have studied Western philosophy for nearly half a century. To the eyes of Europeans, it may look strange and even ridiculous that a Japanese studied Western philosophy in the Far East. But a brief tale of what motivated me to study it would convince them to some extent that the Japanese have reason to do so.

When World War II ended, I was enrolled at the age of 16 at a school to train navy officers. The war's end, however, forced me from this path and engulfed me in the postwar chaos. I changed from one job to another to look after my family, which had returned home from China. Soon afterward, I worked on the black market and made a small fortune, enough to enter a special agricultural school newly established in the area where I was living. But I realized I was in no mood to study farming.

Knowing that I would never be able to rise in the world even after graduating from that school, I gave up my studies and went delinquent in utter despair over my future. To divert my mind from such misery, I indulged myself in reading literary books, and came across Dostoyevsky's works,

and went heart and soul into his world.

The heroes of Dostoyevsky's novels — Raskolnikov in "Crime and Punishment," Stavrogin in "The Possessed" and Ivan in "The Brothers Karamazov" — were all young men in their 20s, who were in the abyss of despair. Under the Russian czarist regime, they found no place to demonstrate their abilities and had to lead a desperate life. Perhaps, I took comfort in overlapping myself with these despondent heroes.

Having read almost all the works of Dostoyevsky, I went through one commentary on Dostoyevsky's literature after another. These commentaries included ones by André Gide, Shestov, Berdyaev and Volyn'skii, and some Japanese critics. These were considered must books for students and were wonderfully well written. Probably, that is because they indulged in reading Dostoyevsky's works in their youth and wrote these books as a kind of settlement of accounts for their spring-time of life.

Then I began something curious — reading "Sickness unto Death" by

Danish thinker Kirkegaard as a commentary on Dostoyevsky's works. Of course, Dostoyevsky (1821-81) and Kirkegaard (1813-55) did not influence each other. Both lived in outlying districts of Europe in the mid-19th century.

Dostoyevsky and Kirkegaard went to Central Europe where they were greatly disillusioned because religious belief had become a custom of daily life and Protestant culture lacked the severity of belief. Upon returning home, Kirkegaard and Dostoyevsky had a common experience — criticizing Christian culture in Central Europe on the authority of primitive Christianity and the Russian Orthodox Church, respectively. Perhaps because they had such an experience, their thoughts had much in common. Kirkegaard's "Sickness unto Death" deals with "despair," which was the main theme of Dostoyevsky's works.

"Sickness unto Death" is by no means a fatal disease. This title is a reversal of Christ's words narrated in the story that Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead in the book of John. "Sickness unto Death" means a person stricken with a mental disease who

be perceived in terms of a priori notions of time and space, and that mathematics is regarded as the best method to take cognizance of the bodies and the motions. From the late 19th century to the early 20th century, a succession of important mathematical discoveries were made, which spawned a crisis in mathematics. For example, discoveries were made of a variety of non-Euclidean systems of geometry, and of logical contradictions in the theory of sets that form the most fundamental part of mathematics. Furthermore, it has been clearly demonstrated by Goedel's incompleteness theorem that there exists an insurmountable limit in general to human reason.

Modern rationalism is based on what is supposed to be a self-evident premise that, irrespective of whether

human reason perceives it, the objective world does exist by itself with the structure of perfect order that admits no ambiguity. The premise was, however, dealt a decisive blow by discoveries that followed the establishment of the quantum theory in the early 20th century: discoveries that it is theoretically impossible to determine with accuracy the position and the speed of a quantum in motion at the same time, and that, depending on two different methods of observation (observer's different points of view), a quantum takes both of the two forms, a particle and a wave, respectively, which contradicts the axiomatic premise of modern rationalism that the particle and the wave are mutually exclusive from each other in the form of existence.

The premise of modern rationalism implies as a matter

can neither live nor die and is in despair. Kirkegaard defines "Sickness unto death" as despair. According to Kirkegaard, every person is in despair, and to be able to despair is a symbol of his or her human superiority. To be actually despondent is an intolerable pain and sin. Kirkegaard describes various forms of despair and charts the process in which despair deepens limitlessly as consciousness grows. This book is a morphology or a phenomenology of despair.

One of the forms of despair enumerated by Kirkegaard may be read as a psychological analysis of each one of the heroes in Dostoyevsky's novels. On the contrary, abstract descriptions of "Sickness unto Death" seem to be embodied in many ways in Dostoyevsky's novels.

As I read Dostoyevsky's novels in such a fashion, I wanted the ontological structure of men in such despair to be unraveled more clearly. If that is done, I thought, I would be able to better adapt myself to despair. In those days, I learned that Heidegger, a German philosopher, in his work "Being and Time," analyzed the being of man from the viewpoint of temporality under the strong influence of Kirkegaard. I couldn't resist reading the book and attempted to read a Japanese translation of it, but couldn't make it out at all. Yet I learned that the book is too hard for

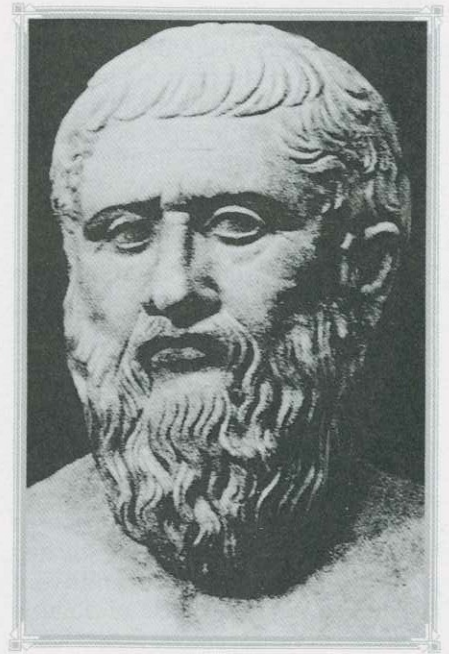
laymen to understand without undergoing special training to read philosophy books. At last, I made up my mind to enter a university.

I thus entered the philosophy department of a university where I learned German to read "Being and Time." The book interested me a great deal as I had expected. But I soon realized that it was too difficult to understand after a single or even a second reading. This made me determined to settle down to study philosophy in 1950, five years after the end of the war.

The course I thus chose toward the study of philosophy, I think, is similar to the one young people in Europe followed after World War I and World War II. If not, it may have been a path young people pursued, regardless of age, to accomplish spiritual growth. I hope that what I have stated above helps readers to understand a little of what drove a young man in the Far East to study philosophy.

Descartes' concept of reason

In those post-World War II years, existentialist movements were at their heyday. Heidegger's "Being and Time" was then regarded as a source of such movements. Naturally, with much sympathy, I read works by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. After beginning my study of philosophy, however, I realized that I needed to



Plato's theory of Idea, the foundation of Western philosophy, is quite different from the Japanese concept

study modern philosophy as well as classical philosophy. I encountered an insurmountable barrier which I had never perceived before while reading contemporary philosophy books published in Europe and the United States. For example, I was utterly unable to understand the basic concepts underlying Western philosophy as presented in Plato's "Idea," Descartes' "reason," and

of logic that human reason itself does not exist within the objective world it perceives (which is analogous with a camera that cannot take a photograph of itself). So long as the premise is based on the dichotomy of subjectivity and objectivity, it is impossible to find solutions to aporia or difficult questions, such as if it can be assured that what human reason, which does not exist in the objective world, perceives is identical to the objective world itself, and where subjective human reason has a point of contact with the objective physical body.

It is worthy of close attention that phenomenology, propounded at the beginning of the 20th century, directed basic criticism at modern rationalism on the grounds that it is, in fact, human consciousness per se that envisages certain kinds of structural order in the

objective world and that it is nothing but a fallacy of inversion for modern rationalism to presuppose that, irrespective of whether human reason perceives it, the objective world does exist by itself with the structural order.

(3) It can be said against the background of history of world civilization that a crucial paradigm shift has been in progress in the 20th century. While limits inherent to the existing paradigm have gradually become clear, the basic structure of a new paradigm is still in a nebulous state.

Now that interdependent relations are evolving in the world in a variety of aspects, it has become indispensable to put together the wisdom of different

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Kant's "categorical imperative." I could understand their definitions on the surface of the words, but even when I searched within in myself for what is nominated in these concepts, I couldn't detect anything at all.

Let's take Descartes' "reason (*raison*)" as an example, which is the foundation of modern rationalism. How can we understand modern rationalism without understanding Descartes' concept of reason? Of course, we Japanese too, frequently use the word "reason," taking Descartes' concept of "reason" for granted. But, Descartes' "reason" and the "reason" we Japanese have in mind are fundamentally different.

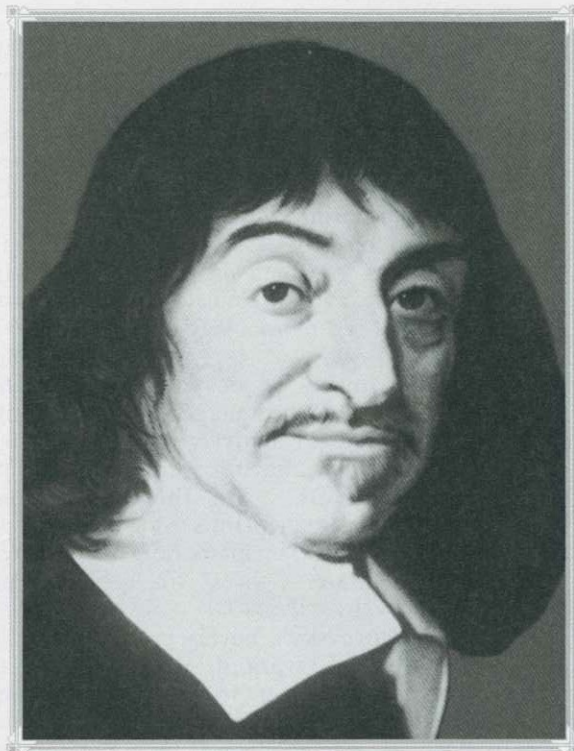
The "reason" in the mind of Japanese refers to the sophisticated portion of man's natural ability of cognition. As in the case of animate abilities, it varies among individuals. No wonder. But Descartes says that "reason" is equally shared among all people. At the beginning of Part 1 of "Discourse on Method," Descartes points out, "Good sense (*bon sens*) is, of all things in the world, the most equally shared." It is followed a few lines later by an expression that "good sense" is "reason." That is why man can obtain universal cognition by exercising this "reason" alone without working physical sensory organs that vary with individuals.

Descartes also says that man can recognize even the structure of being

in the innermost parts of the world by using this "reason." The "method of doubt" that Descartes refers to in "Discourse on Method" was an operation to substantiate that "reason," even when separated from the physical senses, can exist and function by itself without body.

His argument completely baffles Japanese. The "reason" that we Japanese have in mind may help us adapt to the environment as a sophisticated ability of cognition, but it is impossible to acquire universal cognition as Descartes considers it, to say nothing of cognition with objective validity in the sense that it suits the world's structure of being behind sensuous endowment. It is no wonder that this is so, since the reason in our mind is part of the natural ability of cognition, however sophisticated it may be.

If so, Descartes' "reason" is not a natural ability of man. The reason as he calls it exists within man but is not a natural ability of man. It has to be taken as a supernatural ability, that is, a metaphysical ability.



"Good sense is, of all things in the world, the most equally shared" — Descartes

This thought of "reason" cannot be born without being premised on the Christian theory of world creationism. The world was created by God as a great reason, so that rational rules govern the world. And God created man in the last stage of creation and impartially conferred man with a

cultural traditions in order to build the new paradigm, and in this context, Japan's cultural tradition is expected to render significant contributions.

(4) The philosophy of "kooh" or "emptiness", the respective Japanese or English equivalent of the Sanskrit term "śūnyatā" which originated in the Mahayana Buddhism of ancient India, forms an integral part of Japan's cultural tradition. Presumably, this will have a vital bearing on the paradigm shift now in progress on a global scale.

One of the salient features of modern rationalism is that it places total trust on language. It presupposes a priori that words represent an immutable substance which exists as a matter of reality. On the other hand,

the philosophy of "kooh", basing itself on insightful reflection on linguistic functions that language is an instrument of conceptualization by means of abstraction, reveals that words represent a mere concept of utterly abstract nature and also demonstrates that such a logos-oriented premise of modern rationalism on linguistic functions contains a latent contradiction in logical terms and that, insofar as this premise goes, it is impossible to provide any convincing descriptions about the ever-changing world.

From the viewpoint of "kooh", the world we live in is one complete whole that cannot in itself be divided into parts. Practical necessity induces us to draw perforated lines in it so as to abstract a variety of concepts for practical purposes. It follows accordingly that what is

reason akin to God's reason. Man's reason is something like a miniature of God's reason that may be described as a blueprint of world creation. That is why the world's

structure of being can be grasped only if this reason is correctly worked. Man's reason exists within man, but it does not belong to man as a natural being. It is rather like a branch office of the supernatural reason of God. Without taking it that way, it's hard to understand Descartes' concept of reason.

Of course, reason was deprived from such a theological background as it went through the 18th century of enlightenment. And yet, the strict relationship of correspondence between rational cognition and the world's structure of being was maintained. Kant attempted to guarantee the relationship of correspondence between the structure of being in the phenomenal world and reason (transcendental subjectivity) by dividing the world into a world of the thing itself and a phenomenal world. Hegel attempted to guarantee congruity between "the rational" and "the real" by advocating the dialectic notion of spiritual generation through labor: "The rational is the real, and



The metaphysical mode of thinking derived from Plato's philosophy has become part of doctrinal system of Roman Catholics

the real is the rational." (The Philosophy of Right)

Even bereft of a theological background, the basic structure of Descartes' rationalism has been inherited in its entirety. When I read the following passage in "Search for a Method" by Sartre, who must be negative about rationalism, I was surprised by the depth of rationalism of that sort on the part of Westerners.

"Nobody, not even the most radical empiricist, is willing to limit Reason to the mere order of our thoughts.

According to the philosophy which one holds, one may claim that Reason reproduces the order of Being or that it imposes an order on Being. But Reason is in any case a relation between Being and knowing."

For Japanese, who, thoroughly living in nature, have never thought of things supernatural, it is naturally impossible to understand Descartes' concept of "reason" or "modern rationalism" that started therefrom. Nonetheless, Japanese, who have read Descartes' works, interpreted his

described by language is nothing but a concept of abstract nature that is scooped and detached with a fishing net called language cast in the seamless "oneness" of the reality and that there inevitably exists a crucial discrepancy which cannot be bridged between the reality and the description.

(5) It can be said that Zen Buddhism, one of the features of the Japanese cultural tradition, sprouted up in ancient India from a seed of Mahayana Buddhism, blossomed into flower in China with the nutrition of the Tao philosophy and has then borne fruit in Japan. It bases itself upon the philosophy of "kooh" to probe into the self and is expected to play an important role in overcoming nihilism. As a certain British historian

pointed out, an in-depth Christian-Buddhist dialogue started for the first time in the 20th century, and this is considered one of the reasons why the 20th century is marked with a white stone in man's long history. At this time when a paradigm shift of great magnitude is in the making, it would be of profound significance to shed light on the sagacity of Zen Buddhism in the context of man's history in order to cope with the problems modern society faces.

(6) The COVER STORY in the current and next issues features the views of leading Japanese intellectuals each endowed with an insightful study of modern rationalism and a prodigious knowledge of the wisdom of Japan's cultural tradition.



Photo: W.W.P.

Nietzsche attempted to critically overcome the metaphysical mode of thinking

concept of "reason" as if it is their own concept of reason that is spontaneous in nature and attributed contradictions naturally arising therefrom to the immaturity of their own thought.

Nietzsche and Heidegger

It took me a long time to realize this. European thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger enlightened me. Concerned about the future of modern technological civilization, the legitimate child of modern rationalism, these philosophers turned their critical eyes to the rationalism that drew the blueprint of technological civilization and tried to understand where it came from.

In their view, modern rationalism is not merely based on the Christian theory of world creation. It is rather a modern renewal of the metaphysical mode of thinking that has prevailed since the days of Plato. The metaphysical mode of thinking, which sets

the supernatural principle, like Plato's "Idea," outside nature, through the medium of which to view nature (that is, to view nature as an imitated image of "Idea" or something that carries its shadow), is an extremely singular way of thinking that could only be born in a cultural bloc, called the "West." Though variously called "Idea," "Pure Form," "God" and "reason," the metaphysical mode of thinking itself has been handed down consistently in a cultural bloc, called "Europe." That such a mode of thinking has been inherited even in the doctrinal system of Roman Catholics is understandable, given that Augustine modeled his doctrinal structure after Plato's philosophy in the late ancient

period. Herein recognized is the existence of the metaphysical principle called "God" and nature is accepted as long as it is a creation of God. It is probably in such a context that Nietzsche called Christianity Platonism for the public. In the midst of the tide toward the resurgence of Platon-Augustinism that occurred from the late Middle Ages through the early Modern age, Descartes once again renewed the metaphysical mode of thinking in a modern light, thereby establishing "reason" as the metaphysical principle.

This is how Nietzsche and Heidegger position modern rationalism. Under this metaphysical mode of thinking, nature is considered to be a mere material formed and created by the metaphysical principle. Nature is a mere material that in itself has no power to live, that is, a dead material, and all the power of creation is monopolized by the metaphysical principle. Nature is cognized by reason

as an imitated image of "Idea" or a creature of God, and is received merely as a thing technically processed according to its cognition. The metaphysical mode of thinking is closely linked with the material theory of nature that looks upon nature as an inorganic material for creation and the mechanical theory of nature.

Now it must be understood that contemporary technological civilization is a legitimate child of modern rationalism and a natural consequence of the metaphysical mode of thinking. With the Industrial Revolution spreading across Europe, Germany was going to embark on large-scale industrialization after the Franco-Prussian War. It was not without reason that Nietzsche, who lived in this age, was concerned about technological civilization and the future of society, and attempted to criticize the metaphysical mode of thinking (Platonism).

Nietzsche was originally a student of classical literature and a researcher of the history of the tragedy of Greece. He was aware that the Greeks in what he calls the "tragic times of Greece" when pre-Socratic thinkers, such as Anaximander and Heraclitus were active — and long before the classical times when Plato and Aristotle were active — looked upon nature as a "physis" that generates itself and lives. For the Greeks in those days, "physis" was everything, and anything that went beyond nature was unthinkable. "Physis" is a noun that was derived from "phyesthai," a verb that means "growing on its own alive." For them, all creation ("ta panta") was "physis" in that sense.

By reinstating the view of nature in the ancient times of Greece and the original view of nature that regards nature as a living thing, Nietzsche attempted to critically overcome the metaphysical mode of thinking handed down from Plato's days and modern European culture based thereon, and to turn the direction of cultural formation around. The concept "will to power" — a concept often misconceived — points to the structure

of "living" as connoted in "living nature."

In Nietzsche's view, power and will are the forms in which life manifests itself. And life has a dynamic structure in which it constantly tries to grow stronger and larger than what actually exists. Naturally, power and will are power and will as far as they try to grow bigger and stronger. Nietzsche attempted to name that dynamic structure with the term "will to power."

Though he left a stain on his life by committing himself to the Nazis, Heidegger inherited this thought of Nietzsche and tried to relativize, from a grandiose field of vision, the Western philosophy that has been

pursued since the days of Plato and Aristotle and criticize the metaphysical mode of thinking. But he went astray as he easily linked the Nazi's cultural ideology and his dream of opening the way for cultural formation through revival of a living nature.

The Japanese view of Nature

On second thoughts, one may realize, however, that the notion of a living nature is familiar to us Japanese, who, in ancient times, believed that creation "grows as a reed sprouts." The term "musuhi," as seen in the names of "Takami-musuhi-no-kami" and "Kami-musuhi-no-kami," gods who appear in the "Kojiki (Records of Ancient

Matters)," Japan's oldest history book, is a combination of "musu," a verb signifying plant generation, used like "koke musu (moss grows)" or "kusa musu (grass grows)," and a noun "hi," meaning principle. It is extremely close in meaning to the Greek word "physis."

The use of the word "shizen(nature)" to refer to living creation is not such a long-established practice. That the word "shizen," whose Chinese characters mean "be so by itself" or "so become by itself," was chosen to describe living creation indicates the Japanese view of nature. This word is used as a Japanese equivalent of "physis" or "nature." At least, before our country began to



Photo: Nagano Prefectural Tourist Information Office, Tokyo

Living nature is an important concept for the Japanese

tread the path toward modernization in the second half of the 19th century, Japanese identified nature as "motherly nature" that embraced and brought them up.

This original principle of Shintoism is clearly distinguished from the national Shintoism that was elevated to the status of a national religion amid the formation of a modern nation from the Meiji Era and was eventually exploited by militarism until the end of World War II. The essence of Shintoist ideology since ancient times consists in the worship of a living nature. It may well be said to be an expression of the Japanese sentiment of life rather than a religion. Such a sentiment was not completely swallowed by the Buddhism and Confucianism that landed on the Japanese archipelago. It rather seems to have supplied the power to transform them into their Japanese versions.

For Japanese who remember such sentiment, the thoughts of Nietzsche and Heidegger, who attempted to reinstate the concept of a living nature and overcome the unnatural metaphysical mode of thinking and its product of technological civilization — and thinkers in modern Germany and France who are under their influence, directly and indirectly — are understandable.

In a sense, Japanese may have a better understanding of such thinking than the Germans and the French.

Of course, Japanese in the late 19th century began to follow the modernization road to catch up with advanced countries such as Europe and the United States, and positively accepted their technologies. The Japanese studied these technologies in a pragmatic way and were not concerned with their ideological foundation. Our efforts produced marvelous results, making Japan an economic superpower despite the devastating defeat it suffered in World War II. As a result, Japan naturally now shares with Europe and the United States the negative effects of technological civilization, such as



The worship of living nature is the essence of Shintoist ideology (Photo: Ikushima-tarushima Shrine in Nagano Prefecture)

Photo: Nagano Prefectural Information Office, Tokyo

environmental disruption and shortages of resources. The widening scars of technological civilization pose a serious problem for us Japanese.

It is anticipated that the Japanese view of nature or sentiment of life in a nature-surrounded environment, along with the ideological workings of thinkers in contemporary Europe, will make some contribution to the process of striving to resolve this problem toward the 21st century. Efforts must be made to stop such a social formation in which technology dominates, abuses and extinguishes nature. There seems to be no other way to ensure the existence of mankind than to look for a society in which, as had been the case with all cultural blocs, technology naturally finds a deserved niche as a necessary technology for life.

Japanese can't be as optimistic as the Europeans and Americans who believe that they have built up their technological civilization by their ideological works, that is, by forming modern science based on modern rationalism. Probably, they think that

the existing swollen technological juggernaut can finally be controlled with reason since it is a product of human reason. I wonder if this is so. Judging from the course of events that has transpired, it seems to me that technology has its own logic and is self-moving. Isn't reason or science merely generated and utilized by this technological motion in its demand? Can humankind change the direction of or suspend this technological motion under our initiative, whether by controlling it with our reason or by shifting our way of thinking?

Such skepticism lingers in my mind. It seems that the limit to modern rationalism, if any, lies in such deep-rooted misapprehension about human leadership having arisen from an attempt to establish human subjectivity. I would be happy if this proves to be my misunderstanding. **JTI**

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