

# UC San Diego

## UC San Diego Previously Published Works

### Title

Une modernité indigène: Ruptures et innovations dans les théories politiques japonaise du xviii<sup>e</sup> siècle (An indigenous modernity: Discontinuity and innovation in eighteenth-century Japanese political theory) by Olivier Ansart (review)

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/37p9p73v>

### Journal

Philosophy East and West, 66(3)

### ISSN

0031-8221

### Author

Hoston, Germaine A

### Publication Date

2016

### DOI

10.1353/pew.2016.0072

Peer reviewed

Olivier Ansart, *Une modernité indigène: Ruptures et innovations dans les théories politiques japonaise du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* [An Indigenous Modernity: Discontinuity and Innovation in 18th-Century Japanese Political Theory]. Series: Collection Japon, Vol. 21. Paris: Éditions Les Belles Lettres, 2014. Pp. 292. 35,5 euros. ISBN: 978-2-251-72220-7.

Reviewed by **Germaine A. Hoston**, University of California, San Diego

E-mail: ghoston@ucsd.edu

This thoughtful, elegantly written book offers valuable insights into Japanese political thought in an era that culminated in the Meiji Restoration. Despite the specific characteristics the rigid centralized feudal structure of Tokugawa society, Ansart argues, political ideas generally associated with the advent of "modernity" in the West were generated indigenously in a context in which knowledge of the West was limited primarily to science and technology (p. 15).

The main focus of the book is the thought of Kaiho Seiryō (1755–1817).<sup>1</sup> Seiryō was inspired by two schools of thought that had been opposed to each other until he synthesized them: those of Dazai Shundai (1680–1747), who reassessed the legitimacy of profit and trade (p. 16), and the "bourgeois Confucianism" of Yamagata Bantō (1748–1821). Other thinkers made advances in criticizing the "traditional" "naturalist paradigm", but remained within the rigid class framework of Tokugawa society. By contrast, Seiryō's assertion that government was needed to ensure that the passions (*désirs*) that lead men away from the virtue that thinkers within the Confucian and Neo-Confucian emphasized, according to the paradigms that had dominated Japan's philosophical landscape, offered a new moral psychology that liberated him from that framework. That new model allowed him to build an alternative political theory based on

objectives that were consistent with what would become the new objective of those who would make the Meiji Restoration – national prosperity (*fukoku*).

Ansart asserts that "modern political theory" "is a theory that sets forth the terms and conditions of distribution of tangible and intangible items that are characteristic of modern societies" (p. 18). This definition raises issues with regard to the book's central argument. First, Anglo-American theorists generally demarcate modern from pre-modern theory more in terms of the severance from political prescriptions, with Machiavelli's redefinition of *virtú* as the skill of *the prince* in ensuring the permanence of his power, and thus the primacy of *raison d'état*. In addition, the ancients saw what was natural as good, in contrast to modern theorists such as the social contract theorists, who established the legitimacy of the polity on the basis of the fact that it was an artifice, a product of human reason. Ansart does, albeit outside his discussion of the nature of modernity, emphasize the significance of the "Naturalist Paradigm", in pre-modern Japanese thought. He also notes the significance of industrialization and urbanization, in which the terms and conditions regarding the distribution of property are determined by implicit or explicit negotiations and agreements. Finally, Ansart stresses the role of the individual as a major factor in the "*rupture moderne*" [the discontinuity or "break" that defines modernity] (pp. 15–19).

Ansart thus emphasizes that new thinking about the possibilities of more appropriate processes for distributing property involved critical thinking about human psychology. The backdrop for this was the establishment of the rational school of Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi as orthodoxy by an edict issued in 1790 by the Tokugawa shogunate, which also prohibited any "heterodox" teachings. Neo-Confucianism had initially been greeted in Japan with considerable hostility, as evidenced by the thought of Yamaga Sokō, Itō Jinsai, and Ogyū Sorai. While others (e.g., Maruyama Masao) have asserted that Sokō's thought marked a transition between

naturalism and positivism in Zhu Xi's thought and identified Sorai as Japan's first modern political thinker, Ansart disagrees with this view. For Sokō, he claims, it was ultimately the will of Heaven that "organizes the world and human societies," and Sorai remained within the limits of that discourse when he argued that Neo-Confucianism was an illegitimate invention and that genuine Confucianism could only be reconstructed by returning to the ancient Chinese sage kings, who alone knew and could know the "will of Heaven" (pp. 69–90)

In the fifth and six chapters, Ansart outlines the moral psychology of traditional thinkers, both Confucian philosophers and advocates of the code of the samurai (*bushidō*) and then sets out what he sees as the "practical and theoretical problems in those moral psychologies, since they would be denounced vigorously by the advocates of a positive reassessment of the passions." Neo-Confucians based their arguments on Mencius's view of human nature as naturally good, and his belief (*Mencius* VIII:35) that "'In order to cultivate the innate virtues of the heart, one need only diminish the desires'" (p. 92). Likewise, the central virtue in *bushidō* was loyalty (*chū*), which required putting the interests of his above each samurai's own personal interests, and being prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice of his own life (pp. 95–96).

Here, Ansart argues, quite unconvincingly – and unnecessarily – that these naturalist moralist psychologies were ultimately unsustainable for two reasons. First they were "incoherent/inconsistent" (*incohérence*): If "*ri*" ("*la raison des choses*") is all-powerful, how could *ki* (physical matter) be attributed autonomy that enables it to overcome the goodness of *ri*? In reality, Neo-Confucianism did not attribute omnipotence to *ri*. The second alleged inherent weakness of the naturalist paradigm – that motivation is "nowhere to be found" (*introuvable*) – is alleged to lie in the fact that, for both Neo-Confucian and *bushidō* theorists, the only reason to pursue virtue is that it is decreed by Heaven. Ansart maintains that "it is not possible for human

beings to be motivated entirely by something outside of himself," a claim that rings astonishingly false to anyone who has practiced Christianity, Judaism, Islam, or Buddhism over the millennia.

It would have more useful to note that despite the rigidity of Tokugawa society emphasized by Ansart, significant changes were occurring in Japanese society that laid the groundwork for the upheaval in political thought that he describes. The unforeseen consequences of the shogunate's endeavors to secure its permanent dominance – the alternate attendance system and the establishment of stable peace – which included the encouragement of commerce, the accumulation of wealth by merchants, to whom the increasingly less militarized samurai became indebted generation after generation – resulted in a disparity between political status and economic power that was sufficiently disturbing to both the shogunate itself (which repeatedly cancelled those debts by fiat) and to the social stratum that supported it. The latter (the samurai) were compelled to rethink their position in Japanese society, increasingly exchanging the pen for the sword as the instrument of choice, and Japanese thinkers were compelled to rethink the contours of their world to provide an account of the accumulation of wealth among the commoner merchant class that corresponded to reality.

These factors help to explain a central question for Ansart: Why is it Kaiho Seiryō whose philosophy marked the dramatic break (*rupture*) with the naturalist paradigm? Seiryō was responding to these changes in Japanese society. His approach was utilitarian: The existence of the passions, notably the most fundamental one, "self-love" (*amour de soi*) was unavoidable, he argued, and the Confucians wasted their time "dreaming of virtues that do not exist in real human beings". Teaching virtues to ordinary people was a misguided practice of government, which should instead channel their passions in to the production of rice (pp. 110–115). Ansart's explanation of Seiryō's philosophy is compelling: The distinction was less between the passions

and the virtues than between two different categories of passions – great ambitions and "base desires" (*petits désirs*). The former are capable of using instrumental rationality to plan for long-range goals in pursuit of interests, while the latter are focused on short-term gratification, and the former can prevail over the latter (p. 118). The virtues are now valuable as a "direct instrument" for "the achievement of a specific purpose or goal" rather than as ends in themselves (p. 118).

The establishment of that goal and the mobilization and coordination of the people's egoistic passions to achieve it is the role of the State, which is central in Seiryō's theory. Seiryō did not see that there was a natural mechanism (such as Smith's invisible hand) by which individual passions work naturally to achieve the ultimate goal of prosperity of society as a whole. Such passions are necessary to get people to work, but they must always be "manipulated" and "directed in a specific direction" (pp. 119–122). This view of government as constantly intervening was much closer to that of Hobbes than to that of Smith or Locke.

The remainder of the volume is devoted to demonstrating how other critics of the naturalist paradigm could not duplicate Seiryō's accomplishment: a "new imaginary" of society that envisaged a shift to a contractual notion of social relations. The book, which includes a convenient glossary of the major thinkers discussed, offers a rather incomplete conclusion. Nevertheless, its discussion of Seiryō offers a major contribution regarding the generation of indigenous modern ideas in an otherwise "closed" society.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In accordance with Japanese tradition, names appear here in their customary Japanese order with last name first, and first names are used to refer to individual thinkers.