

BOOK REVIEW

## Methodology, comparison and humanity: a reply to Otobe, Futai and Yamaoka

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In his 1961 book *Nihon no Shisō (Japanese Thought)*, Masao Maruyama famously invoked the image of the octopus pot to characterise the mindset of his compatriots, including academics (Maruyama, 1961: 129–44). According to him, the Japanese are prone to split into small groups and get absorbed into their respective group business, losing sight of a wider world, just like octopi trapped in small separate pots. Whatever one may think about the ability of Maruyama’s metaphor to illustrate the general Japanese *mentalité*, I have always thought it applies more to Anglophone academia than to the Japanese, as far as contemporary political theory is concerned. Different approaches such as the analytic, the continental and the historical mingle with each other in a somewhat chaotic manner in the Japanese scholarly community, whereas the sub-disciplinary boundaries are drawn more rigidly in its Anglophone counterpart. Thus, I sometimes mulled over the messiness of Japanese academia with a slight sense of envy while writing *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* in Britain, Europe and the USA, wondering, ‘why can’t analytics and Continentals even speak to each other in this part of the world?’<sup>1</sup> I was of course aware that this was a textbook case of the ‘grass is greener’ syndrome, as some of my Japanese colleagues had complained to me about the lack of discipline and specialisation in Japanese scholarship. But their complaints were not enough to stop me fantasising about the fertility of Japan’s untamed academia. I am therefore deeply grateful to the editors of the *Japanese Journal of Political Science* and Tomohito Baji for hosting this review forum. In what follows, I would like to address some of the main concerns and criticisms raised by Nobutaka Otobe, Akio Futai and Ryuichi Yamaoka under three headings: methodology, comparison and humanity.

### 1. Methodology

Let me begin with an important challenge posed by Otobe concerning methodology. He underlines a certain ambivalence I display towards an old style of political theorising, which is shared, albeit with differing emphases, by Arendt and Berlin. The old style was less ‘institutionalised and professionalised’ than the new one, which became the norm in the last quarter of the twentieth century (Hiruta, 2021: 203). Those in the former group moved freely across disciplinary boundaries as they tackled the most pressing issue of their times: totalitarianism. Those in the latter group, by contrast, are more specialised, for better or worse. A typical new-style political theorist would have a couple of ‘research areas’ and devote her entire career to them without trespassing on other areas, let alone other academic disciplines (except when she applies for an interdisciplinary research fellowship, in which case her research areas magically expand and multiply). As Otobe notes, I hold greater sympathy for the old style than the new. I cannot see how anyone with curiosity and intellectual honesty can possibly be content to confine oneself in a few so-called research areas. And yet, I refuse to claim that the old

<sup>1</sup>To provide a context, I studied and worked at various academic institutions in Britain, France, Denmark and the USA between 2003 and 2022, and took up my current job as a lecturer in philosophy at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies in Japan in October 2022, a year after the publication of *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin*.

style is unambiguously superior to the new (see Hiruta, 2021: 4, 201–204), making Otobe wonder exactly how sympathetic I am to the old style, after all. He asks two questions. First, am I not guilty of exaggerating the difference between the old and the new? Second, why do I not agree with Jeffrey Green and acknowledge that the old is indeed clearly better than the new?

Let me answer the latter question first, by way of engaging with Green's (2015) work in some detail. His target of criticism is 'methodological militancy', by which he means a kind of disciplinary isolationism shared by analytic philosophers and Cambridge School historians. The former insists that philosophy has nothing to learn from the history of philosophy, and the latter claims that history has little to contribute, at least directly, to philosophical reflection. In short, philosophy for philosophers and history for historians, full stop. Against this shared isolationism, Green defends an older tradition of political theorising, which he describes as the 'simultaneous recovery of past authors and polemical intervention into the problems and concerns of the present' (Green, 2015: 427). This is an *older* tradition because, Green argues, it runs through the work of such writers as Thucydides, Machiavelli, Tocqueville and, more recently, Arendt and Berlin. Green does not discuss in detail how this tradition may be reasserted today, but one concrete proposal he makes is that the political theorist should act as a shepherd of the 'canonical' writings, starting with Thucydides. A central part of the political theorist's job, according to Green, is to continuously engage with the discipline's classics, subjecting them to rigorous scrutiny to see if they survive the test of time.

Do I agree with Green's vision of the old–new political theory? Not quite, as Otobe observes. But why, exactly? One reason is that I am more sceptical than Green is about the idea of the classics and the canon. Although he pays lip service to 'de-essentializing' the classics (Green, 2015: 439), Green's understanding of them appears resolutely conservative and somewhat reactionary, showing little interest in the on-going debate about the complicity of the Western canon in such wrongs and evils as racism, colonialism, sexism and patriarchy (see Ramgotra and Choat, 2023). Nor does he consider the related debate about the need to 'deparochialize political theory', that is, the need for (mainly Anglophone) political theorists to stop neglecting non-Western political thought altogether (Williams, 2020). Green's enthusiasm for Arendt's work is especially worrying in this context because, as I discussed elsewhere, her thought displays some of the worst features (as well as the best) of the 'Western tradition', including her dismissal of African cultures as primitive and unworthy of recognition (Hiruta, 2023). Although Arendt has a lot to offer to help us think about our predicament in the twenty-first century, I doubt she was at her best when she acted as a shepherd of the Western classics. I would not go so far as to claim that the idea of the canon and the classics should be abandoned altogether. Nevertheless, I am in greater agreement with Cambridge School historians than with Green on the following point: the construction of the so-called canon is a product of a particular configuration of power, and it often, though not always, serves the oppressive status-quo.

A further reason why I distance myself from Green's vision of the old–new political theory concerns the sociology of knowledge production. Green sometimes appears to think that the only thing we need to do to improve political theory today is to undo what has been done by analytic philosophers and Cambridge School historians over the past few decades. What is required, on this view, is to return to the good old days – those of Arendt and Berlin – when philosophy and intellectual history were not clearly separated from each other. Whether Green thinks such a return is feasible or not, I have a much keener sense of a break between 'then' and 'now' than Green does. As McKeown (2022) recently observed, Anglophone political theory today is a nightmarish game, in which participants savagely fight with each other for publication from 'top journals', in order to get or keep stable jobs in a world of insecurity, scarcity and precarity. Nobody enjoys this game, but 'almost everyone has given up resisting and accepts the cards they have been dealt'. The result is 'stifling intellectual creativity and dissent, breeding myopia and mediocrity' (McKeown, 2022: 99, 106). I do not agree with everything she says, but McKeown's is the most accurate description of contemporary Anglophone political theory and the system of its knowledge production I know of. Of course, some individual scholars still do excellent research *despite* the adversarial conditions. But I cannot see how political theory as a

discipline can return to the good old days, for we now live in a time when academic institutions are perverted and the incentive structure is destructive of scholarly integrity.

This brings me to the other question raised by Otobe: whether I am guilty of exaggerating the difference between the old-style political theory and its present-day successor. I do not think I am, but I concede that I could have delineated the difference more carefully. In my book, I may have sometimes given the impression that I think the old-style political theory declined because of John Rawls's influence. This is untrue; such a claim would exaggerate a single individual's influence to an implausible extent. Whatever impact Rawls's work may have had on the development of political theory, he is not to blame for the kind of 'myopia and mediocrity' that characterise the discipline today (McKeown, 2022: 106). The culprit, if this is the right term, is a set of social forces that are often referred to as 'neoliberalism'. Although this is a commonly used term, I suggest that the Arendtian concept of 'the social' is a more illuminating one. Academia has suffered something of the 'rise of the social' over the past few decades, with the result that the first task of the scholar has become survival, that is, sustenance of *zoe* rather than the pursuit of a *vita contemplativa*. Of course, concerns with such 'social' factors as job security and the prospect of external funding have always been a part of academic life. But today they shape and corrupt everything we do in academia, from the choice of a research topic to the selection of collaborative partners and decisions on publication venue. Rawls was largely exempt from all this, partly because he enjoyed various privileges that came with his gender, class, race/ethnicity, colour, nationality and family background,<sup>2</sup> partly because he *was* John Rawls, and partly and most importantly because he belonged to a different era. Otobe is thus right to observe that Rawls shows many traits of the old-style political theorist, including his integrity and his Weberian devotion to his work. But Rawls and Rawlsians are different: the latter, like everyone else in academia today, have been compromised by 'the social'. And how else could they be? They live and work in a failed system, which turns 'specialists with spirit' into specialists without, to use Weber's phrase cited by Otobe.

My assessment of the condition of knowledge production in contemporary political theory is thus much bleaker than that of Green. Of course, I did not discuss it in *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* because that would have been irrelevant to the purpose of the book. And yet, the sorry state of the discipline was something I had in mind as I wrote my book, which was an outcome of my effort to refuse to play the academic game whose rules were set by 'the social'.<sup>3</sup> In fact, I often told my friends that I was committing a career suicide in writing *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin*. To some extent, this was my exaggerated way of saying how unwise it was, from the social perspective of 'career building', for an early career scholar to write a 120,000-word book, instead of producing a few papers tailored for so-called top journals. But I was not exactly joking when I brought up the s-word. I was convinced that I had to be quixotic to resist the professional norm and write what I believed was worth writing. I am currently in the process of finding out how badly my career will suffer as a result. If it dies, so be it. I shall at least die with spirit.

## 2. Comparison

The next issue to consider is that of comparison, which is prominently featured in Futai's contribution. The consensus among the three reviewers seems that juxtaposing Arendt with Berlin is a fruitful intellectual endeavour, that it allows us to see the strengths and weaknesses of their respective works from a refreshing angle, and that my book may be regarded as a success at least to this extent. Of course, the

<sup>2</sup>If one reads biographies of Rawls, Arendt and Shklar, one would be struck by how unconcerned he was – unlike the two émigré women – with such 'social' questions as job security. This, needless to say, cannot be explained by his superior intelligence. Another reason suggests itself as to why we should *not* try to return to the imagined good old days: these were good only for the privileged few.

<sup>3</sup>Needless to say, my attempt at refusal is no more than an attempt, and I by no means claim that I am somehow exempt from the influences of 'the social' in academia. Simone de Beauvoir's famous epigraph to the second volume of *The Second Sex* comes to mind: 'half victim, half accomplice, like everyone else'.

three reviewers do not think my comparative analysis is flawless. For example, Otohe suggests that my book would have been stronger had I paid more attention to Arendt's and Berlin's work on intellectual history, while Yamaoka expresses his reservations about my interpretation of Berlin's negative liberty. Similarly, it has been argued elsewhere that I overstate the contrast between Arendt's anti-nationalism and Berlin's liberal nationalism (Ashcroft, 2022: 1095), that I sometimes present the difference between the two thinkers in an overly stylised manner (Waldron, 2022: 4), and that I should have considered their 'characters' more carefully (Shorten, 2023: 277). Notwithstanding these and other criticisms of specific issues, readers of *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* generally agree that comparing the two thinkers is overall beneficial to the study of Arendt, Berlin and twentieth century political thought more broadly.

This consensus is worth reflecting on, for it is not something that I anticipated when I was writing *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin*. On the contrary, I encountered a good deal of scepticism as I presented draft chapters at conferences and workshops. Arendt scholars were especially sceptical; some were downright hostile. An eminent Arendt scholar in the USA was in fact so annoyed by the very idea of comparing Arendt with Berlin that he exploded into a racist rant. (His last word on my research was, 'I don't speak a word of Japanese, by the way'.) I hasten to add that he is by no means representative of the Arendt studies community. But the tendency to idolise her is not unique to him. One corollary of this unfortunate tendency is that some Arendt scholars are unwilling to consider her work beyond the terms set by Arendt herself. They are keen on comparing Arendt with those whom she *herself* engaged with, such as Heidegger, Jaspers, Benjamin, Scholem, Strauss, Machiavelli, Montesquieu and perhaps even Edmund Burke. But they tend to show considerable intellectual cowardice when it comes to comparison between Arendt and those she *herself* did not engage with, including Berlin. This is one defect I tried to redress in my book, not only as a political theorist but also as a member of the Arendt studies community. Arendt scholars in theory uphold intellectual courage as a virtue exemplified by her, but they often fail to demonstrate it in their own work in practice. I wanted to be different. I wanted to be a better Arendtian. I wanted to emulate Arendt's intellectual courage, with the Berlinian proviso that I avoid the tactlessness she sometime showed, especially in *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Futai highlights Zionism as a particularly important point of comparison between Arendt and Berlin, and I would like to make some remarks in reply. First, there is important asymmetry between the two thinkers: Arendt's stance on Zionism shifted significantly over time, while Berlin's remained largely unchanged. This does not necessarily mean that Arendt's thought was in general less consistent than that of Berlin. Rather, the asymmetry was due to the specific context in which their respective Zionist ideas developed. To simplify a good deal, there were multiple, and often conflicting, Zionisms prior to 1948. One of them then emerged as triumphant as the State of Israel was founded in that year, relegating its competitors to irrelevance, at least in the short run. As it happens, the triumphant variant turned out to be not too different from the one that Berlin had supported since childhood, whereas it was something that Arendt could not bring herself to accept, no matter how triumphant it became. Hence her immensely complicated intellectual journey in search of an alternative Zionism. As I wrote in *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin*, her 'thinking about Zionism evolved drastically and discontinuously during the 1930s and 1940s, responding to the dramatic turns of events in Europe and the Middle East' (Hiruta, 2021: 15). She consequently put forward a range of proposals for the future of Zionism in her numerous writings published in that turbulent period, now included in her posthumously published *Jewish Writings*. Depending on which proposal to focus on, Arendt's position can be construed variously, from her alleged quasi-Revisionism to her alleged post-Zionism.

Obvious though it may sound, it is crucial to keep in mind that Arendt's *Jewish Writings*, published in 2007, was not available to Berlin, who had died 10 years earlier. Of course, the precursor to Arendt's *Jewish Writings*, titled *The Jew as Pariah*, was published during Berlin's lifetime, in 1978. But this was long after Berlin had formed his opinions about Arendt and her work. This means, among other things, that he came to conclude that Arendt had irresponsibly converted from a 'fanatical Jewish

nationalism' to its opposite extreme without having access to the entirety of her work on the subject (Berlin cited in Hiruta, 2021: 15). In addition, it is important to keep in mind that we know very little about the basis on which Berlin drew his conclusions about Arendt's purported conversion. Was he aware of her support for the formation of a Jewish army? Futai seems to assume that he was, but we in fact do not know if he was. There is not enough evidence to settle the matter. Similarly, contrary to Futai's observation, it is not known whether Berlin 'judged Arendt to belong to the Revisionist group'. It is possible that he did, but it is also possible that he did not. What he said was that she seemed to him to have been 'a hundred percent Zionist' and to have committed herself to a 'fanatical Jewish nationalism' in the early 1940s (Berlin cited in Hiruta, 2021: 15). These words may signify Revisionism, but they can mean other things, too. Again, there simply is not sufficient evidence for us to draw a definitive conclusion.

The point I am trying to get at is the importance of a sense of history in doing research on the Arendt–Berlin conflict. Many aspects of this conflict are likely to remain obscure because the surviving evidence is insufficient. Of course, 'surviving evidence' is an evolving entity, as relevant archival materials often come to light with the passage of time. In this sense, *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* tells the story of the two thinkers as it could be told in 2021. I have every reason to hope that future scholars will update my analysis and, if necessary, correct it as new archival sources become available. But if one is to undertake this task, one must observe fidelity to evidence, carefully distinguishing between what can and cannot be surmised from the source material.

### 3. Humanity

Yamaoka's review raises more questions than I can answer in the limited space I have here, but one question that strikes me as especially important concerns the last keyword in the subtitle of my book: humanity. One of my central arguments in *Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin* is that an important part of the theoretical disagreement between Arendt and Berlin comes down to the difference between the models of the human being that they held, if implicitly. Arendt's model is that of 'the human being as a political animal conditioned by natality and plurality'. Berlin's, by contrast, is that of 'the human being as a choice-making creature'. This difference, I continued, 'is the most fundamental theoretical difference that divides Hannah Arendt and Isaiah Berlin' (Hiruta, 2021: 80).

Yamaoka is ambivalent about my argument. On the one hand, he accepts that the two thinkers indeed have differing models or visions of the human being, and that my analysis more or less accurately captures the difference. On the other, Yamaoka criticises me for downplaying important asymmetry between the two thinkers: Arendt's model amounts to 'a kind of perfectionism', whereas Berlin's is 'negative and minimalist'. The former addresses 'the existentialist question over a meaningful way of life', whereas the latter bypasses it. Based on this observation, Yamaoka raises the following question: 'is it possible for [the value pluralist] Berlin to have a particular vision of what it means to be human?'

I would like to juxtapose Yamaoka's contribution with Ronald Beiner's discussion in his thought-provoking *Political Philosophy: What It Is and Why It Matters*, which puts forward Yamaoka's concern more forcefully, if a little differently. As Beiner sees it, political philosophy 'from Plato onwards [has been] a dialogue between rival conceptions of the good' (Beiner, 2014: xvi). Arendt's work is in conformity with this great theory tradition, for it makes bold claims about what it is for the human being to live a good life. For her, it is politics that 'truly humanizes human beings' (Beiner, 2014: 1). Berlin's work, by contrast, falls outside the boundaries of political philosophy so construed, because it does not defend any particular conception of the good. On the contrary, 'Berlin's conception of the good [...] consists in an awareness that there is no one definitive conception of the good' (Beiner, 2014: xviii). Like Yamaoka, Beiner sometimes uses the Rawlsian distinction between perfectionism and anti-perfectionism to characterise the difference between Arendt and Berlin (Beiner, 2014: xxii). But he tends to put the difference in stronger and more colourful terms, writing that Berlin's pluralist thought, unlike Arendt's monist rival, 'does not have the drama, the compellingness, the eros of some actual philosophical claims about *the* nature of the good' (Beiner, 2014: xviii).

Rather surprisingly, Beiner concedes the possibility that Berlinian pluralism is in fact true and its monist rivals are false. In other words, he considers it possible that there is no single conception of the good that applies to all human beings, and that there are multiple goods, and various combinations of them, that can *equally* make human life meaningful, albeit in differing ways. And yet, for reasons that I do not quite understand, Beiner insists that it is more important for a political philosophy to be ‘interesting’ than to be true. ‘The suggestion that human ends are many and no one end is definitive may be true’, Beiner writes, ‘but it seems a disappointing way to continue the dialogue that Plato began’ (Beiner, 2014: xviii). He consequently expels Berlin from his definition of political philosophers. The pluralist’s ideas, according to Beiner, are uninteresting, ‘deflating’ and in fact ‘*parasitic upon* non-pluralistic philosophies of the good’ (Beiner, 2014: xviii, xx).

I find Beiner’s conception of political philosophy alluring in many ways, but I think he takes two wrong turns. First, I genuinely cannot see why it is more important for a political philosophy to be interesting than to be true. It may be interesting if two plus two occasionally becomes five or if Rachmaninoff invented hip hop. But if it does not, it does not; and if he did not, he did not. There is no reason why false mathematical theories or false musical theories should be valued or treated as canonical just because they are interesting. The same principle applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to false political theories. Second, I think Beiner’s focus on rival conceptions of the good is off target because the question of the good is derivative of a more fundamental question that has divided political philosophers from Plato to Berlin and beyond: what it means to be human. The two debates – one about the good and the other about the human – are closely connected because one cannot make normative claims (as distinct, perhaps, from metaethical ones) about the good, unless one makes important claims about the only beings that can pursue and experience the good *as good*: human beings.<sup>4</sup> But the two debates are distinct; one can have a conception of the human being that defies the very idea that a single conception of the good uniformly applies to all human beings. This, of course, is Berlin’s pluralist view, and there is nothing uninteresting, unambitious or unphilosophical about it. In fact, it is a bold idea because, as Beiner observes, it questions the monist presumptions shared by the majority in the great theory tradition. If political philosophy is understood (as it should be) as a continuing debate about the human rather than about the good, Berlin has a rightful place as one of the most innovative contributors to it.

As must be clear by now, my answer to Yamaoka’s question – is it possible for Berlin to have a particular vision of what it means to be human? – is in the affirmative. Although Berlin does not have a particular conception of the good, he has a particular conception of the human, and a highly appealing one at that: the human being as a choice-making creature. Yamaoka’s doubts seem to me to originate from the fact that he, like Beiner, runs together one debate about the good and another one about the human. But the two are distinct. What it means to be human is one question; what it means for the human being to live well is another. If one accepts Beiner’s view that the latter is *the* defining question of political philosophy, one must indeed accept his conclusion that Berlin and other pluralists do not qualify as political philosophers. But the premise is implausible, not least because, by Beiner’s own account, it is possible that Berlinian pluralism is *true* and all the interesting monist alternatives are false. If so, it would be sensible to give up the questionable premise and modify the overly narrow conception of political philosophy. What, then, are the boundaries of this intellectual enterprise? What is political philosophy *about*? My suggestion is that it centrally involves competing conceptions of the human. Of course, political philosophy does not end with providing an answer to the question, ‘What does it mean to be a human being?’ But it begins with it. And on this fundamental question Arendt and Berlin indeed have a superbly interesting disagreement.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this article, I have addressed some of the main concerns and criticisms raised by Nobutaka Otobe, Akio Futai and Ryuichi Yamaoka. I have clarified my view about the difference between the old-style

<sup>4</sup>Non-human animals may be able to experience and perhaps even pursue what human beings call the good. But, so far as we know, they cannot experience or pursue them as good; they do not recognise them in such terms.

political theory and its present-day successor; considered the intellectual benefits and challenges of comparative work on Arendt and Berlin; and argued that Berlin indeed has a particular conception of the human, if not a specific conception of the good. I am grateful to the three reviewers for engaging with my work and writing incisive reviews. Thanks are also due to the attendees of the workshop that Tomohito Baji coordinated in June 2022, from which this review forum originated. I was heartened by the intellectual vibrancy of the workshop, which gives me the hope that Masao Maruyama's aforementioned critical observation about the intellectual infertility of Japanese academia is no longer true, if it ever was true.

**Competing interest.** None.

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