

The Philosophical Implication of God in Mainstream Japanese Religions

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Abstract- The popularity of “Made in Japan”, “Cool Japan”, Japanese ethics, and its economic miracle has drawn the world's attention. Similarly, Japanese philosophy and the philosophy of Japanese religions have the same attraction and uniqueness. However, very few academic texts reflected the uniqueness of the philosophical implication of God in Japanese religious philosophy in a single research article, let alone the non-academic and popular ones. My paper addresses this gap and puts the philosophical implication of God in Japanese mainstream religions. The paper finds that, unlike the popular Western and Abrahamic notions of God, who created everything with the ‘word’ while being beyond the existence of the material universe, the God in Japanese Shintoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism is an integral part of material existence. The Japanese Gods, thus, are seen to be a part of the creation itself, whereas the Omni-God of Western philosophy is uncreated, yet the first cause of the existence of every being. God’s being an integral part of the creation in Japanese religions dignifies the existence of every being since all have the potential to be part of God.

Keywords God, Japan, Religion, Japanese Philosophy, Religious Philosophy.

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1. Introduction: What do I mean by “God”?

The significance of God in civilised human life is so much so that even when a militant atheist is overwhelmed with a fact or something, he exclaims, “O my God!” instead of saying, “O my science!” or “Holy science!”. God has, over the ages, become our habit. Although we all are habituated with and understand what the term “God” implies when we hear it, the perception of the very term “God” varies from person to person, place to place, and from time to time. It does not imply the same perception of God when a Hindu says, Dadhichi, a human Rishi, saved the good Gods with his bone during the war between Devas (Gods) and Asuras (Evils), and when an Abrahamic believer says God, the uncreated, the cause of everything, created the whole universe within six days. This concept of variation regarding the perception of God can be exemplified by the perception of ‘cold’ among the people of various regions. For example, people in South Florida can say it is ‘cold’ when the temperature drifts to 50° F, but in Alaska, it is ‘not cold’ until it is well below zero. As in the case of ‘cold’, we all understand what the term ‘cold’ means, but the perception of ‘cold’ varies from context to context, and so is in the case of ‘God’-we all know what the term God implies, but perceive it differently.

God has never ceased to be the centre of philosophical interest for philosophers. Every branch of philosophy has a direct or indirect connection with the existence and nature of God. God has, in His existence and nature, the ‘universal reason’ of each being and everything that takes place in the universe. According to Heraclitus, this ‘universal reason’ is the God, which embraces the whole existence. The ‘universal reason’ that Heraclitus denoted to God gives a philosophical explanation to metaphysics, thereby providing an argument in the millennium-old philosophical discourses regarding metaphysics (Blackburn, 1999).

St. Anselm put it in another way by claiming that God is the being than which no more extraordinary being can be conceived. Although Anselm’s definition and ontological argument for the existence of God was disputed by the philosophers later, he provided the foundation for Aquinas’ God of analogies. Aquinas argued that God is the independent entity upon which all the dependent entities are dependent, and we cannot truly denote any characteristics to the self-sufficient God; all we can do is use analogies to talk about Him (Ashworth & D’Ettore, 2021).

David Hume furthers the ontological argument of Anselm and Aquinas by defining God as the ‘first cause’ or ‘ultimate cause’ or ‘necessarily existent being’ that is the reason for the existence and without the existence of Him, the existence of any being cannot be explained (Hume, 1990). Although Hume’s definition may seem self-explanatory, many philosophers later argued that the definition and argument of the ‘first cause’ dispute the proposition itself. Instead, they argued that we know nothing about the ‘ultimate cause’ of existence; we can, at best, estimate the cause

by examining its effect. As a result, we give our ignorance the grand name, ‘God’, since we cannot explain the mystery of the universe. According to their argument, God is synonymous with ‘cosmic mystery’ and ignorance (Harari, 2018). Likewise, Tanabe’s “Philosophy as Metanoetics” claims an “absolute nothingness” of our existence and mentions our effort to give reasons to our life and death as a desperate try to avoid such nothingness of existence (Tanabe, 1986).

As evident from the above discussion, the perception of ‘God’ varies from context to context- neither every believer similarly perceives God, nor all atheists believe the same God. However, in this essay, I will denote the term ‘God’, the similar meaning that the philosophers and Abrahamic believers, over the centuries, have denoted (Lenon, 2006). Accordingly, by the term God, the ‘philosophers’ God’, I mean here, is the Omni-God. As Taliaferro (2007) found from her through research on the God of philosophers, the Omni-God must be:

1. The omniscient (all-knowing)
2. The omnipotent (all-powerful)
3. The omnibenevolent (possessing perfect goodness)
4. The omnitemporal (existing in all places)
5. The omnipresent (existing at all times)

Using the term ‘God’ to imply the Omni-God or the God of the philosophers as described above, in the following parts of this article, I will try to find out the nature of the God in Japanese Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and metaphysics, and see whether the nature of those Gods resembles the philosophers’ God.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study uses the assistance of secondary literature that contains facts and analyses of the topic. Data has been collected from secondary sources such as books, journals, scholarly articles, etc. Initially, the fact-finding focuses on the basic concepts regarding God, specifically, the God of the philosophers or the Abrahamic God. Later, it focuses on the notion of God in Japanese mainstream religions and analyses the notions using various philosophical arguments found in secondary sources. The selection criteria for the secondary sources for this paper are stated below:

1. The language of the literature must be English.
2. Literature must contain a distinct interpretation of the Abrahamic or philosopher of God.
3. Literature must contain a metaphysical interpretation of Japanese Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

It is to be noted that this study is not a systematic review or a meta-analysis. Hence,

it includes scholarly books and journal articles relevant to its storyline and argument. A limitation of this study is the exclusion of relevant Japanese literature on this topic.

3. Notion of God in Japanese Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism

The sections below interpret the notion of God in Japanese Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism in the light of the Abrahamic God or philosopher God.

3.1 God in Shintoism: Is everything a part of God?

The word ‘kami’ in the Shinto’s literal meaning, ‘the way of kami’, has often been translated as ‘God’ in academic works. However, using the meaning that the word ‘God’ implies in Western philosophy and Abrahamic religions, it would be tough to understand the Kami of the Shinto beliefs and its philosophical implications. In Shintoism, the word ‘Kami’ does not imply the Omni-God, the uncreated and the creator of all the beings. Instead, it has a unique cosmogony that says that Kami did not create the human being; instead, the human being descended from the divine Kami (Picken, 1994; Tomoko, 2019). Even the words ‘creation’ and ‘being’ have different meanings in Shinto cosmogony, separating Japanese cosmogony from Western monotheistic and philosophical cosmogony.

Unlike the notion of creation in the Western cosmogony, which represents the beginning of creation as creating order in the cosmos by completely eliminating the evil or chaos and thus, making defilement something other than one’s very self, which should be exterminated for the sake of cosmic order, the Japanese cosmogony refers the defilement or the evil as an essential process to reinvigorate and reorganise the being. Evil, thus, is referred to as an integral part of the divine Kami who causes defilement to keep the free flow of life in various forms of existence. Further, the defilement in Shinto cosmogony is also distinct from the notion of defilement in Western theistic cosmogony. In Shinto cosmogony, the defilement refers to the death of a being, which is essential for the divine Kami even. However, death does not mark the end of the being; instead, it means the beginning of reinvigoration (Tomoko, 2019).

According to the description of creation in the oldest recorded book of Japanese cosmogony- the *Kojiki*, the *Taka-ma-no-hara* (the Plain of High Heaven) already existed without being created even before the existence of any Kami. This ever existence of a being separates the Japanese cosmogony once again from the Western one since the latter claims that in the beginning, there was nothing but God, who created everything as the first mover. On the *Taka-ma-no-hara*, there then appeared three deities: *Ame-no-mi-naka-nushi-no-kami* (The Deity who is Lord of the Sacred Center of Heaven), *Taka-mi-musuhi-no-kami* (High Deity of Musuhi), and *Kami-musuhi-no-kami* (Divine Deity of Musuhi). Interestingly, after their emergence on the plain of heaven, the deities took no action of creation like the

Omni-God of Western cosmogony. Unlike Western cosmogony, the first deity of heaven mysteriously has no significant role in the later parts of the Japanese cosmogony. However, the deity was the very first being that came into being. The latter two deities, however, formed ‘musuhi’, the fundamental of the Shinto cosmogony. The Japanese word ‘musu’ literally means ‘to come into being’ or ‘to give birth’ or ‘breathing’, which implies the constant appearance of the being or the everlasting flow of life into various forms. In the other part of ‘musuhi’, the word ‘hi’ refers to ‘fire’ or ‘the sun’; if the meanings are combined, the word ‘hi’ has an abstract meaning as ‘the ultimately powerful divine entity’. The word ‘musuhi’, therefore, means the ultimately powerful and mysterious divine entity which causes the existence of everything (Maruyama, 1995; Tomoko, 2019).

Unlike the creation of the process of Abrahamic cosmogony, where the Omni-God created everything with His ‘word’ (Lenon, 2006), the process of creation in Shinto cosmogony describes the birth of every being as the result of reproductive activities of a divine couple- Izanagi and Izanami. Kojiki’s description of the deities giving birth to everything existing in the natural world implies that every being in the universe is an integral part of the Kami, not a mere creation (Tomoko, 2019). Likewise, the phrase ‘giving birth’ metaphorically means the natural proliferation of all beings, which contradicts the Abrahamic ‘creation’ and ‘creator’. However, Izanagi and Izanami are unlike the Omni-temporal God, who always exists as a constant being to create and govern everything. Instead, the death of Izanagi due to the appearance of a fire god indicates the meaning of ‘defilement’ and ‘creation’ in Shinto cosmogony. As mentioned earlier, death in Shinto cosmogony means defilement, and yet, death does not mark the end of existence. The defilement or death of Izanagi symbolises the dynamism of being and the everlasting reinvigoration of existence (Tomoko, 2019).

After the death of Izanagi, all her body parts metamorphosed into many other deities who brought cultural activities and taught human beings how to control nature. Thus, the death of Izanagi implies that the defilement in Shinto cosmogony does not necessarily mean sin, and the defiled being is not separated or exterminated for good. The defiled Izanagi is worshipped as the provider of tremendous power to the living realm, and the defiled being is inevitably transformed into a source of positive powers. This possibility of transforming a defiled being into a positive force distinguishes Japanese cosmogony from Abrahamic cosmogony since evil is a constant negative force in the latter cosmogony and must be exterminated entirely from the good (Ricoeur, 1967).

The notion of sin in Shinto cosmogony also bears the significance of being distinct from the Western cosmogony. Sin in Western cosmogony refers to the obstacles-straying from the straight path, rebellion, deviation - to meet the demands of God. On the contrary, Shinto cosmogony views sin as a recurring disorder; there is no

linear redemption or salvation from the sin. The everlasting and recurring cycle of sin (or disorder) and order is the fundamental of Shinto cosmogony. The myth of Amaterasu and Susanowo exemplifies this philosophy of recurring cycle. Susanowo, the storm-god born from the body of Izanagi, always brings disorder with him and disturbs the order of Amaterasu, the sun goddess. Interestingly, the symbol of chaos, Susanowo, disturbs the cosmic order and yet fertilises the fields at the same time. Likewise, the sun-goddess Amaterasu withdraws to the cave to let Susanowo cause disorder in the universe. After the disorder is caused, she leaves the cave to reinvigorate the being again. This never-ending cycle of order and disorder, death and life, remains intentionally unresolved in Shinto cosmogony, implying the constant transformation of being and eternity of existence (Ricoeur, 1967; Tomoko, 2019).

It is evident from the above discussion that the God of Shintoism doesn't resemble the Omni-God of Abrahamic beliefs and Western philosophy since any of the Shinto Kami doesn't meet the requirements to be called an Omni-God.

3.2 God in Japanese Buddhism: Buddha's God or Buddha is the God?

Buddhism arrived in Japan from the Indian subcontinent via China and Korea during the 6th century. By then, the original Buddhism has already undergone many changes due to the influence of the domestic religious beliefs of China and Korea. Arriving in Japan via China and Korea, Buddhism, like many other things, has been subject to local tailoring, thereby emerging as a distinct form of Buddhism there. Unlike the seemingly atheistic stance of original Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism embraces the idea of a multitude of deities, or the pantheon of various Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, lesser deities, and distinguished religious masters in Buddhism. Although most Buddhist temples in Japan focus on only one Buddha and few Bodhisattavas nowadays, the ancient Japanese Buddhist pantheon counted more than 3000 deities (Nukariya, 2014).

The Japanese Buddhist pantheon has the hierarchical positions of each type of Buddhist deity. The Buddhas, the most important deity, are positioned at the top. Other categories of deities have their position according to the hierarchical orders- the Bodhisattavas, the wisdom kings, the lesser deities, the circumstantial appearances, and the religious masters, respectively. The Buddha, the enlightened one, is the supreme deity of the Japanese Buddhist pantheon. There are five wisdom Buddhas (Akshobhya, Ratnasambha, Amitabha, Amogashiddha, and Vairocana) other than the supreme Buddha, who are the distinct manifestations of Buddhahood and each of them shows their presence in different time world-period.

The five wisdom Buddhas have the strength to control disturbing emotions- envy, attachment, ignorance, anger and pride. If these five emotions are not controlled effectively by any person, there is the potential to be reincarnated as a lower-status

being in the next life. However, effective controlling of these emotions has the potential to be reincarnated as one of the five wisdom Buddhas even (Thrangou, 2001). The nature of the five wisdom Buddhas and the potential of reincarnation of human beings into any being, including the deities even, implies that the deities of the Japanese Buddhist pantheon freely flow in any form of existence at different time periods. The notion of this free flow of existence makes it clear that every existent being can be a part of the deities, and at a point of its existence, it indeed becomes a part of the Buddhas.

The Bodhisattavas and wisdom kings help the devotees to get rid of the opposing forces within and without the self of the devotees. These gods are the manifestation of Buddha's power and knowledge and his compassion for all beings. Furthermore, the heavenly deities of the Japanese Buddhist pantheon represent the consistent endeavour to attain nirvana in one of the lives it passes. Like Indian cosmology, Buddhist cosmology says that the deities reside in the 'Three Worlds' according to their hierarchical positions. The Buddhist Three World is told to be in Mount Sumeru, where the supreme entity of Hinduism, the Brahma, also resides. The similarity in cosmic view and the presence of the same deities of Hinduism in the Japanese Buddhist pantheon clearly manifests the influence of Hindu cosmology and cosmogony on its Buddhist counterparts. The Buddhist view of Avatara, or the capability of Buddhist deities to change their appearance in different world times, also resembles the Hindu view of Avatara, which means the different appearance of Brahma in different lives (Campbell, 2008).

It is inferable from the above discussion that the reincarnation of all human beings, including the Buddhist deities, conveys the message that the divine entities co-reside with the human beings and the Buddha is not beyond human existence; instead, any person can attain Buddhahood by following the way Gautama Buddha shows. Therefore, the Buddha in Japanese Buddhism does not mean the supreme entity who is the cause of the existence of every being. However, He is uncreated and governs the whole universe outside material existence. Instead, the Buddha Himself is subject to the material existence. Unlike the Omni-God of Abrahamic beliefs and Western philosophy, the Buddha himself goes through the path of salvation and inspires human beings to follow him. It is, therefore, evident from the discussion that the characteristics of Buddha do not match the characteristics of the Omni-God of Abrahamic religions.

3.3 God in Japanese Confucianism: Is there any God in Japanese Confucianism?

Classical Confucianism did not engage itself with spiritual matters much. Instead, it focuses on human-centred ethical practices, behavioural excellence, and moral character to ensure social harmony and cosmic harmony in a broader sense.

Confucius himself often refused to talk about spiritual matters broadly. To him, it is unworthy to bother oneself with the thoughts of the divine worlds without mastering the harmony in the very world he/she is currently living. Nevertheless, Confucius did not mean to leave the spiritual matters altogether; he advised us to keep a respectful distance from them. However, he is found to behave as if he felt the spirits around him while joining any ceremony related to the spirits and ghosts. However, the absence of a broader discussion about the spiritual world in classic Confucianism leaves room for many to assume that classical Confucianism is an atheistic ethical-political utopianism (Tucker, 2018).

Despite lacking a broader discussion about God, spirits, and ghosts, Confucianism has also discussed cosmology and metaphysics. Unifying the God of Heaven (Tian) and the individual self to pursue cosmic harmony between humanity and the divine entities is Confucianism's basic premise and ultimate purpose. According to the Confucian cosmogony, the monotheistic divine authority caused by the principle of Heaven (Li or Dao) bears the order of the creation in itself. Individuals can transform themselves as the person in Heaven by realising their role in the universe as human beings and contemplating the orders of Heaven. Again, contemplating the orders of heaven means ensuring the cosmic harmony between the self, society, nature, and heaven by performing the roles that the universe delegated to each entity (Adler, 2014).

The Confucian cosmogony claims that heaven is not a being that existed before the material world but has always co-existed with the material world. Regarding the creation, the Confucian explanation revolves around the bipolar notion of Yin and Yang. It says that the cause of the universe's existence lies in the universe itself, not in the intervention of an outsider. The primary chaos of material energy and the bipolar organisation of that energy into Yin (positive) and Yang (negative) has spontaneously caused the universe to exist. According to the Confucian cosmogony, the creation is, therefore, an uninterrupted ordering and organisation of the Yin and Yang forces of the universe. Unlike the Abrahamic cosmogony, the universe did not come out from nothing. The continuous organisation of Yin and Yang is always evident in the universe- there is darkness and light, female and male, negative and positive, winter and spring, and disorder and order. Every being in this universe shows this bipolarity of characteristics. The Confucian philosophy seeks a delicate balance between these two and pursues the 'middle ways' between all the configurations that exist in the universe (Feuchtwang, 2016).

One of the key concepts in Confucian cosmogony is Tian, the God of Heaven, who resides in the northern culmen of the skies and in the spinning stars it contains. The very nature of the universe and laws that govern all beings come directly from Heaven as the divine order of Tian. The term Tian was used very mystically by Confucius. In the 'Analects' of Confucius, he admitted Tian as his creator, lawgiver,

and ultimate judge. Confucian further added that it is possible for a human being to know the activities of Tian, which would give him/her the sense of possessing a unique position in the universe. However, Tian is not in any way meant by Confucius as the Omni-God, the otherworldly entity, and the transcendent creator who existed before anything had come into existence. By the term 'Tian', Confucius instead meant 'the regularity of the universe' or the laws of nature, which can be interpreted as 'the way things exist' in the universe. Accordingly, Tian conveys and represents the ways to keep cosmic harmony and teaches how every being should act through the rhythm of nature. By observing the rhythm of nature very carefully, human beings can learn the particular role he/she is to perform, thereby keeping the cosmic harmony intact (Hsu, 2014).

The above discussion indicates that the Confucian divine explanation of existence or Tian is nothing but the very laws of nature. The notion of Tian in Confucian cosmogony is thus very far from being the Omni-God of Abrahamic cosmogony—the uncreated and the first cause of the existence of every being. Therefore, classical Confucianism does not have any God when the word 'God' implies the God of Western cosmogony. However, although Japanese neo-Confucianism includes spirits and ghosts to denote the spiritual form of Yang and Yin, respectably, this new form of Confucianism does not similarly provide any Godlike entity in its cosmogony.

4. Concluding remarks: What is so unique about the Gods of Japanese mainstream religions?

Japan has the unique characteristics of accepting the good things from other cultures and uniquely localising them to fit the Japanese society and culture. From the language, religions, and various cultural elements to the automobile production and education system, Japan has shown its craft of unique localising everywhere. Likewise, the Japanese mainstream religions and philosophy have absorbed the unique Japanese features, although many of the thoughts originate outside of Japan. Except for Shintoism, most religious philosophy came either from or via China to Japan. Still, many distinctive features distinguish the thoughts and practices of religious philosophy between these two countries.

The central theme distinguishing the notion of God in Japanese Shintoism, Buddhism and Confucianism from the notion of Abrahamic God is that the Japanese Gods exist in the material world. Contrary to the Abrahamic God who created everything with the 'word' being beyond the existence of the material universe, the God in Japanese Shintoism, Confucianism and Buddhism is an integral part of material existence. The Japanese Gods, thus, are seen to be a part of the creation itself, whereas the Omni-God of Western philosophy is uncreated, yet the first cause of the existence of every being. The phenomenon of God's being an

integral part of the creation in Japanese religions dignifies the existence of each and every being since all have the potential to be a part of God. Another distinctive feature of God in Japanese religion and religious philosophy is that derailing from the way of God does not lead to everlasting hell; it instead leads to metamorphosis into another being, including the deities. Therefore, the ability of the Japanese God to transform an evil power into a positive power and let the evil defile again to continue the perpetual cycle of good and evil distinguishes it from the Abrahamic God. Hence, the notion of God in Japanese Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism does not resemble the “God of Philosophers” and Abrahamic God.

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