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The figure of an aporetic knower doing world philosophy as situated 'field' philosophising in Northern Australia

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Presenter: Yasunori Hayashi

Title: The Figure of an Aporetic Knower Doing World Philosophy as Situated Field Philosophising in Northern Australia.

Good evening everyone, my name is Yasunori Hayashi. I am originally from Japan and am doing my a PhD study at Charles Darwin University located in the Northern Territory of Australia. I would like to begin my presentation by acknowledging the traditional owners and custodians of the Gulumerrdjin Larrakia/Darwin land and water on which I present tonight and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

Slide 2

In this short presentation, as the figure of a Japanese 'aporetic' knower I will attend to particular happenings in particular heres-and-nows re-visiting particular moments I have experienced. I develop an autobiographic reflexive account of becoming a practitioner of world-philosophy. Aporetic is the adjective form of aporia, which is an ancient Greek term. Here I use it to attend to a series of intellectual crises emerging from an experiential situation wherein a knower tries to find ways to stay (long enough) in being true to a felt paradox. As one of the figures at play in the situation, the knower is immersed in contradictory, often radically and metaphysically different knowledge claims both of which seem to be valid. The point of tarrying in the paradox is to avoid rushing to judgment.

Prologue

In 1999 I was travelling in Turkey as I wanted to experience that country located between Eastern Europe and Western Asia on the ordinary world map. I thoroughly enjoyed learning the history of people and places, playing backgammon and chess in local markets, and being fascinated with the melodious reading of the Quran I heard elsewhere… the beginning of the series of experiences subsequently brought me to Aboriginal Australia happened unexpectedly… One evening on a street in Istanbul I was hearing and captivated by the sound of the didgeridoo played by a street performer, a musical instrument perfected by Aboriginal Australians over millennia. Why enthralled with a

didgeridoo in Turkey? I still don't know… I might need to attend to this question one day in the future… After two months of travel in Turkey, back in Japan I and other Japanese friends/world music enthusiasts devoted years to collecting and appreciating LP records, cassette tapes and Compact Discs featuring Australian Aboriginal music accompanied by the didgeridoo. With the hope of being able to play a good sound on the didgeridoo, we devoured the liner notes accompanying those music resources prepared by academics such as ethnomusicologists and anthropologists introducing some playing techniques like buzzing lips, imitating animal sounds, and circular breezing techniques…. extraordinary classic. Captivated by the sound of the didgeridoo flowing out from a music machine, I couldn't put a lid on my enthusiasm for meeting with Aboriginal players and directly learning from them.

Experiencing Apory 1

A year or so later I arrived in Aboriginal northern Australia of Bininj country. Bininj is the people of West Arnhem Land… After a four-hour bus ride from Larrakia Country (Darwin) on reaching a Bininj community, Gunbalanya, I was fortunate to encounter a group of Bininj elders gathered near a local art centre… I introduced myself and modestly confessed my passion for the didgeridoo over several years back in Japan… I was taken aback to be admonished by one of the Elders with what I heard as an aphorism "You gotta speak my lingo before playing mako". Mako is a word for didgeridoo in the Bininj language.

I just couldn't figure it out. How does the act of speaking and playing the didgeridoo connect at all? The aphorism made no sense. I still recall the moments when this aphoristic statement arrested me and made me deeply confused… couldn't logically connect it with how I knew the didgeridoo at all then. Despite my discomfort, nevertheless, I was comfortable with staying with my problems becoming as I would later recognise them as a knower who begins puzzling in apory, in not knowing how to know. I recognised that it would take time to nurture my capacity and I should NOT reason or explain away the problems in a hurry.

Experiencing Apory 2

While searching for a connection between the performance of playing the didgeridoo and speaking without much success, I spent several years building a solid foundation to become fluent in the language of Yolngu (Aboriginal traditional owners of East Arnhem Land) through the ways in which

the language is grammatically structured, taxonomically classed and phonetically spoken and written. I found myself quite intrigued by the evident mismatch between the logical complexities by which Yolngu people knew their words and languages and speak their world, and the logic of modern linguistics as presented in the university curriculum. This was when I started sensing a metaphysical difference between how the speakers of Yolngu Aboriginal languages account the phenomenon of language and how speakers of English account it. Again I didn't know how to name this... but nevertheless I just stayed closely with aporetic naïveness.

Passing now to the present, while still being trapped in the unknowing, in juggling logics of words and languages between Yolngu and English while still thinking within the language world of Japanese, I now find myself as a co-director of the newly established First Nations Diplomacy Centre at Charles Darwin University in northern Australia.

One day in our office I was interrogated in a kindly manner by my co-director, a Yolngu Aboriginal Elder, Mr. Gawura Wanambi. Mr. Waṉambi is a ceremonial leader in his clan and a knowledge authority in his Country of East Arnhem Land, also an educationalist, lecturer and researcher at university and an executive member of Aboriginal organisations, certainly wearing very many hats.

We were discussing language pedagory and he was gazing at a widely-known 'standard' scientific linguistic diagram depicting the diversity of Yolngu languages – that's what you are seeing on the slide now. The diagram is centred with a label in bold letters saying 'Yolngu Matha (tongue)', with radially diverging lines stretching towards the names of various clans taxonomised by the label of 'Dhuwala', 'Djininy, Djaŋu', Dhayi'yi and 'Dhaŋu' – all these words mean 'this, here' in English. This is standard scientific linguistic.

The criteria of this typology might seem arbitrary, but actually it expresses modern linguistics assumptions about the nature of language. With some research, I establish that this language diversity chart actually emerged from the linguistic work of trained missionary linguists who arrived in Yolngu country in the 1950s and subsequent years. Adopting the differing terms by which a common meaning '*this, here*', which in modern in linguistic terminology are termed 'demonstratives'. The language terms are utilised in devising a typology... Demonstratives are assumed among linguists as "language universals" (Dissel & Coventry, 2020). These terms are seen as ties between words and the stuff of the world. They are assumed as the initiating vocabulary in every world language.

Mr. Wanambi was registering a pained facial expression, and clearly displaying his confusion on WHY his and other Yolngu languages are separated under the seemingly arbitrary 'this, here' label... Mr Wanambi asked me;

> *"Can you explain how [the linguists place] Wangurri and Gälpu under the same language category? Wangurri is my mother, of Yirritja moiety from Dhälinbuy. And Gälpu is Dhuwa moiety from Ŋaypinya! How could two such different languages [expressing the life of] different places and in with different moiety, be under the same label 'Dhaŋu' in this chart?"*

I pause for moments to find words to respond, yet in vain; so awkwardly, I kept silent. Reading my sad face expressing the feeling of inadequacy that had momentarily overwhelming me, Mr Wanambi comforted me with saying:

> *"No worries, in many situations there's no common bridging Balanda (non-Indigenous) and Yolngu. Language in our Yolngu way is* dhä-manapanawuy *(standing strong together with the land and water) and* garrpiyunawuy *(entangled with the land and water)."*

Working within the Paradox of Different Language Ontologies

Yolngu language authorities and speakers understand such connection and entanglement as language are meaningfully used to manifest the great significance of the speakers of different Yolngu language showing their ancestral connection and their authoritative knowledge boundary to which they belong and only under which they are restrictively authorised to speak, dance and cry. Very important to note here, Yolngu know such differences in the way how words are pronounced and accented and how other clans are connected to other sound patterns through their Ancestral beings in ceremonies (Yunupingu, 1996).

The differences heard among the diversity of Yolngu languages need to resist being identified as things of the world 'out-there', rather should retain its link with people, places and species together in ways that make sense economically (Christie, 1993). The feeling and being of Yolŋu people are fulfilled when hearing Yolŋu words uttered, sung and cried; what matters is how and when words becomes orality, aurality and material that occupy space (e.g. a funeral ground) and time (e.g. dry season) as here-and-now.

On the one hand there is a group knowing language as entangling people and places with its authoritative boundary and networking through ceremonial life, on the other hand, there is a group taxonomising the difference of language by identifying a scientific commonality such as in the paradigm of allomorph, syntactical pattern and pronouns/demonstratives as the act of linguistic inquiry... How can I engage enough with this sort of experiential particularities? An on-going open-ended negotiation often troubles those who employ dialectical inquiry and seeking a linguistic theory

with which Australian Aboriginal languages are 'grammatically', in other words consensually presented… and I wonder how such differences or dissensus can go on together in the academy where Western knowledge tradition is still very strong and how I should engage enough with Yolngu knowledge traditions as distinct logic in the academy.

My Phd work does not intend to contribute to the comparative philosophical work where other-than-Western philosophies were utterly dismissed and are rendered as a capable instrument in solving Western problems (Kirloskar-Steinbach & Kalmanson, 2021). Rather, the primary inspiration for my phd work with Yolngu Aboriginal traditional owners is the on-going on-the-ground work that emerges with a paradox in particular situation. Such experiential paradox locates me as an aporetic field philosopher taking very seriously a decomposing step of 'not' knowing and a composing step to engage enough with situational particularities.

Inspired by Helen Verran and Nishida Kitaro

As a Japanese academic engaging with both Yolngu and Western knowledge traditions in Northern Australia, the tension between different ways of knowing the world is familiar. On most occasions there is no releasing tensions. In response most of us cling to metaphors and analogies in order to imaginarily connect, catching at something we might imagine as lying somewhere in between. Many deliberately bury tensions under metaphoric meaning-making that merely remarks an unproductive sameness and cancels differences. This is often called being 'tolerant'. However, it is also disrespectful to both sides. The strategy has many proceeding in bad faith, while often loudly proclaiming good will.

To engage with my experiential troubles, I have been encouraged by Helen Verran's injunction: *doing differences together while keeping them separate* (2013). When and where discrete knowledge traditions clash and contest in institutional life calls for negotiation of workable links in practice. This requires the figure of a knower who is sensitive enough to metaphysical incommensurability.

According to my colleague Mr Wanambi, we should 'blow up' the imaginary metaphorical bridges and cultivate the difference rather always grasping for sameness. The claim is that practitioners of both knowledge traditions take seriously the discreteness and distinction, and explore the ways in which they might 'go on together in good faith'. I understand that merely tolerating difference is not respectful enough or useful enough. Engaging in a politics of tolerating different knowledge traditions while not taking difference seriously is clearly dangerous to both sides. A good faith politics of difference requires they are kept separate and it has 'paradox' at its centre (Verran, 1998).

Reflecting the experience with Mr. Wanambi, there is to be no ontological compromise over the different logics of categorising the words and languages. Mr. Wanambi and I engaged with the paradox that he and I both felt around the actuality of language as radically ontologically different in English and Yolngu matha. I see the "staying with the pain of ontological troubles" as an example of the on-going the diplomatic politicoepistemic work entailed in Australian Aboriginal language matters.

As much as I'm warmly encouraged by Helen Verran's philosophy of translating disparate metaphysical differences, I'm inspired by Nishida Kitaro's philosophy to engage with and think with paradox. Nishida's philosophical inquiry begins in recognition of pure experience which is NOT the Kantian's notion of transcendental pure experience. Rather, for Nishida, a pure experience is analogous to ontics in Helen Verran's philosophical inquiry—preconceptual and non-wordy. This is where apory, recognition of not knowing how to know begins.

Nishida explains that inquiry should not start from taken-for-granted subjectivity and objectivity—commitment to metaphysical dualism, rather, it should start from a self-awareness that can only be realised by reflecting on oneself in oneself (Maynard, 2022). In his philosophical inquiry, Nishida moves away from a thing-centered view of reality by focusing on the predicate qua universal, and claims that the act of 'to know' only emerges and starts with the reflexive analysis on self-awareness as concrete universal (Arisaka, 1997).

My experiential puzzlements in Bininj Country, in Charles Dawin university classroom when I first learned Yolngu language, and then after in working with Mr Wanambi, have me focusing on pure experience, I am inspired by Nishida to use a logic of paradox in contriving 'absolutely contradictory self-identity' as a beginning in inquiry. According to Nishida, pure experience is an instant event/happening that always emerges, assembles, and mutates wherein the self actively participates and then disassembles in the next instant and the self decomposes in continuity (Nishida, 1989). In the process of translating pure experience with words and writing it down… written materials would become an absolute contradiction to pure experience. Pure experience/ontic and the act of 'to know' would never be the same … This is how I understand what Nishida calls the logic of paradox.

Being inspired by Nishida's work, not in terms of impossibility in fully engaging with pure experience/ontic, but possibility of academic or scholary activity of how good enough we can engage with, think with and then talk about and write about pure experience/ontic…. Helen Verran calls this act as 'ontologising'. I find this quite challenging as the act of thinking with/within experiential paradox to know it enough, and then talking and writing about it resonates well with the concrete

universality of here-and-now. As a figure of an aporetic knower, in my phd work I am paradoxically writing from and then about a series of felt paradox with words.

Conclusion

As a conclusion of my presentation, the ethos I cultivate as a field philosopher in Northern Australia is one which is careful enough in engagement within a particular here and now, that is the reality of a particular happening as people-place. This approach proposes the movement towards predicative philosophical work as the commitment to a situated knowledge practice of field philosophising, backgrounding self and foregrounding others whose places they are (Goralnik, Dobson, & Nelson, 2014). I see myself as nurturing a decolonial sensitivity in Northern Australia where taken-for-granted knowledge can be re-configured and appropriated for particular people-places, and organisations with whom we work. Grappling with unknowing experiential moments and paradoxes and carefully cultivating narratives about them helps me write from them, and later about them, to tease out useful analytic accounts in knowing them well-enough. This constitutes my decolonial ethics as a field philosopher living and working in Aboriginal northern Australia.

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