



ISONOMIA

and the ORIGINS OF PHILOSOPHY

KŌJIN KARATANI

“Karatani’s book makes you see the entire history of philosophy in a new way.”

— SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK

ISONOMIA *and the* ORIGINS OF PHILOSOPHY

ISONOMIA
and the
ORIGINS OF PHILOSOPHY

KŌJIN KARATANI

Translated by Joseph A. Murphy

TETSUGAKU NO KIGEN

BY KŌJIN KARATANI

© 2012 by Kōjin Karatani

Originally published 2012 by Iwanami Shoten,
Publishers, Tokyo

This English edition published 2017 by Duke
University Press, Durham, NC, by arrangement
with the proprietor c/o Iwanami Shoten,
Publishers, Tokyo.

© 2017 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on
acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Matthew Tauch

Typeset in Scala by Graphic Composition, Inc.,
Bogart, Georgia

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Karatani, Kōjin, 1941– author.

Title: Isonomia and the origins of philosophy / Kōjin
Karatani ; translated by Joseph A. Murphy.

Other titles: Tetsugaku no kigen.

English Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2017.

| Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017004990 (print) | LCCN 2017011334 (ebook)

ISBN 9780822368854 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822369134 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822372714 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Philosophy, Ancient.

Classification: LCC B115. J3 K3713 2017 (print) |

LCC B115. J3 (ebook) | DDC 180—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017004990>

Contents

.....

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE · vii

MAP · viii

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE JAPANESE EDITION · ix

INTRODUCTION

Universal Religion · 1 / Ethical Prophets · 5

Exemplary Prophets · 7

Chapter 1

IONIAN SOCIETY AND THOUGHT

Athens and Ionia · 11 / Isonomia and Democracy · 14

Athenian Democracy · 17 / State and Democracy · 20

Colonization and Isonomia · 22 / Iceland and North America · 26

Isonomia and Council · 31

Chapter 2

THE BACKGROUND OF IONIAN NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

Natural Philosophy and Ethics · 35 / Hippocrates · 39

Herodotus · 42 / Homer · 46 / Hesiod · 51

Chapter 3

THE ESSENTIAL POINTS OF IONIAN NATURAL PHILOSOPHY

The Critique of Religion · 56 / Self-Moving Matter · 58

Poiesis and Becoming · 62

Chapter 4

POST-IONIAN THOUGHT

Pythagoras · 68 / Heraclitus · 80
Parmenides · 87 / Post-Eleatics · 96

Chapter 5

SOCRATES AND EMPIRE

The Athenian Empire and Democracy · 103
Sophists and Rule by Rhetoric · 107 / The Trial of Socrates · 110
The Riddle of Socrates · 114 / Daimon · 118
The Socratic Method · 121 / Plato and Pythagoras · 125
The Philosopher-King · 127 / Isonomia and the Philosopher-King · 130

APPENDIX

From *The Structure of World History* to
Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy · 135

TIMELINE OF THE ANCIENT WORLD · 141

NOTES · 143

BIBLIOGRAPHY · 155

INDEX · 159

Translator's Note

.....

This translation is based on the fourth edition of *Tetsugaku no kigen* (Iwanami Shoten, 2012). The text incorporates extensive quotation from Greek, German, Japanese, French, and Chinese sources. Where available, accepted English-language translations have been used. Where not available, translations have been adapted from web-based sources, or translated from the original, as indicated in the citations. I would like to acknowledge the advice and assistance I received from the author's wife, Lynne Karatani, which has been instrumental to the project's readability.



MAP 1 — Map of the Ionian and Aegean Sea Region

Author's Preface to the Japanese Edition

.....

In the process of writing my last work, *Sekaiishi no kôzô* (Iwanami Shoten, 2010; translated as *The Structure of World History*, Duke University Press, 2014), it occurred to me that I should give more detailed consideration to ancient Greece. However, considering the overall balance of the work, it seemed better advised to place these thoughts in a new volume. This book is the result. Consequently, it takes the theoretical framework presented in *The Structure of World History* as a premise. Still, even without that knowledge, this book should be easy enough to follow. To be on the safe side, though, I have included a summary of the argument of *The Structure of World History* and notes on how that corresponds to this book, as an appendix called “From *The Structure of World History* to *Isonomia and the Origins of Philosophy*.” In points where the argument of this book is unclear, please refer to this text.

The first version of this book was serialized in the monthly journal *Shinchô*, to whose chief editor, Yutaka Yano, I owe a great debt. Without his support, this work would never have come to fruition. I am similarly indebted to the editor of this book, Kiyoshi Kojima, from Iwanami Shoten.

Introduction

UNIVERSAL RELIGION

Around the sixth century BCE, Ezekiel and the biblical prophets emerged from among exiles in Babylon; Thales emerged in Ionia on the coast of Asia Minor; Gautama Buddha and the Jain founder Mahavira appeared in India; and Laozi and Confucius emerged in China.¹ This simultaneity and parallelism are striking and cannot be explained straightforwardly based on socioeconomic history. As an example, Marxists typically see philosophy and religion as parts of an ideological superstructure, itself determined by the economic base, by which is meant the modes of production. However, attention to transformations of the economic base has not proven sufficient to explain the overall dramatic transformations of this period.

Consequently, a perspective that would explain the transformations of this period as a revolution or evolution of spirit taking place at the level of the ideological superstructure became dominant. This view is best represented by Henri Bergson's *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932). According to Bergson, human society started as a small closed society, and morality developed out of it for its benefit. If so, what might have transpired for it to become open? It is clear that in the time leading up to the sixth century BCE, human society was evolving at multiple locations from clan society to world empire, where diverse peoples interact on the basis of trade. But this by itself is not sufficient to bring about an open society. For Bergson, "Never shall we pass from the closed society to the open society, from state to humanity, by any mere broadening out. The two things are not of the same essence."² Bergson tried to understand

these transformations at the level of religion. According to him, religion in a closed society is static, while religion in an open society is dynamic. The leap from static religion to dynamic religion is brought about by the “individual of privilege.” Bergson argues that *elan d’amour*, or an “impetus of love,” is at the basis of the evolutionary transformations, and manifests itself through the actions of these individuals of privilege.

However, we need not, and should not, appeal to this kind of theoretical leap. I acknowledge that the leap from a closed society to an open society occurred on the level of religion. Having said that, this fact itself can be traced to the economic base, in my opinion, on the condition that we understand the economic base in terms of modes of exchange, instead of the Marxist’s usual modes of production. For example, the development of religion—from animism, to magic, to world religion, finally to universal religion—falls out neatly when understood in terms of transformation in the modes of exchange.

Normally, the term *exchange* implies commodity exchange. I refer to this as mode of exchange C. This arises when exchange occurs between one community and another, not in exchange internal to a community or family. What occurs in the latter is reciprocity in the form of the gift and repayment, which is mode of exchange A. There is a further type of exchange, different from both, called mode of exchange B. This is an exchange between the ruler and the ruled, which at first glance does not appear to be a kind of exchange. However, if the ruled, in offering obedience to the ruler, receives protection and security in return, this too is an exchange. The state has its roots in this mode of exchange B.

The historical transformations of religion can be tracked in terms of these changes in the mode of exchange. For example, in animism, all things in the world are each thought to possess an *anima* (or spirit). Because of this, a person cannot associate with an object without first putting its anima under control. For example, a person cannot take an animal in hunting without this accommodation to the anima. In this case, the person despiritualizes and objectifies the anima, first by means of making an offering to it and imposing debt on it. This is what is called sacrifice. Burial and funeral rites, as well, accommodate the anima of the dead person through an offering. Magic, too, is a mechanism of this kind of exchange, based on gift giving. It is about putting nature under the magician’s control by making it into an inanimate object by means of a

gift to its anima. If understood in this way, magicians, who see nature as an object, can be regarded as the first scientific thinkers.

An important point here is that, in the society of nomadic hunter-gatherer bands, we find the pure gift but not the reciprocal exchange. There is animism but not magic. Because both reciprocity and magic are attributes of closed societies, it follows that the closed society and corresponding static religion took shape only after fixed settlements arose. The earliest nomadic societies were not in fact closed societies. These were not something that naturally existed from the outset. Closed society emerged in a leap when faced with the crisis brought about by fixed settlements. Fixed settlements brought about accumulations of wealth and power that had not hitherto been possible, and with this the emergence of class divisions and the state. We may be able to say that clan societies imposed reciprocity as a duty on their members in order to avoid these divisions.

To repeat, magic was developed in the tribal societies that emerged after fixed settlements. The fixing of settlements resulted in the need for people to coexist with a myriad of others, both living and dead. As a result, magical arts developed, alongside obligations of reciprocal exchange, and the status of the chief priest ascended. But this ascent happened in a decisive way in state societies. Whenever a centralized state emerges from conflict among city-states, the power of the king-priest is solidified, along with which gods become transcendent.

If we consider this development in terms of modes of exchange, a despotic state is a situation where mode of exchange B is dominant. However, even in this case, both king and subject regard this as a reciprocal relation (mode of exchange A), rather than a relation of the ruler and the ruled, where active submission and rendering of tribute on the part of the subject makes the security and redistributive action of the state appear a gift. The same can be said about the relation between gods and humans.

In a despotic state, gods are rendered transcendent, in domination over humans, while at the same time the reciprocal relationship between gods and humans from the preceding magical stage lingers. The logic there goes something like this. The gods are transcendent and beyond the grasp of the human mind. However, if people offer gifts and prayers, the gods will be obliged to respond to their requests. In this type of relation, the transcendent character of the gods is not yet fully established. For example, if the state were to be defeated, the gods would be discarded.

After this stage, conflicts among various states produce over time a state that rules over a vast territory, or world empire. World empire requires not just military dominance, but the establishment of a trading bloc over a vast area (mode of exchange C). The god in this case becomes a world god that transcends the old tribal gods and tutelary deities. Still, at this stage, universal religion is yet to appear. Because, here again, the god would be abandoned if the empire were to be defeated. A world empire, then, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the emergence of universal religion.

Universal religion too could be understood based on the mode of exchange. To put it simply, universal religion is an attempt to recuperate mode of exchange A at a higher level, after it has been dissolved by modes B and C. To put it in other terms, when a society based on the principle of reciprocity is dismantled by the permeation of state rule and a money economy, universal religion seeks to reinstate those relations of reciprocity and mutual support on a higher level. I call this mode of exchange D.

Mode D seeks to reconstitute A on a higher level. However, D cannot be realized without the prior negation of A. From a different perspective, this means the negation of the magical phase in religion. In this sense, Max Weber is right in locating the defining characteristic of universal religions in “disenchantment.” Disenchantment is generally understood to happen in relation to the rise of the natural sciences; however, for Weber disenchantment lies in the negation of the idea that the gods can be bent to human will by rituals and prayers: “Religious behavior is not worship of the god, but rather coercion of the god, and invocation [of the god] is not prayer, but rather the exercise of magical formulae.”³ It is in the loosening of the hold of the idea of coercion of the gods that a scientific attitude toward nature becomes possible.

In terms of modes of exchange, Weber’s disenchantment implies that reciprocity in the relations between humans and gods is renounced. In fact, to carry this out is not as easy as it seems; even in today’s world religions, coercion of the god continues to be practiced in the form of prayer. If this coercion was really to be renounced, it would be nothing less than a world historical event. However, it is not sufficient to attribute such an event to the appearance of a particular individual of privilege, who opens the closed society.

ETHICAL PROPHETS

So, how did coercion of the gods come to be set aside? We can discover an example in the establishment of Judaism. The Old Testament narrates the history of the Israeli people, from the covenant “between God and the people,” to the exodus led by Moses from Egypt, to the development of the state by David and Solomon after settling in Canaan. However, the codification of the Old Testament was initiated in the Babylonian exile, and the history written there is largely a restructuring, or creation from whole cloth, of events from the perspective of that time. That is to say, Judaism as a universal religion was established among the exiles in Babylon, themselves taken from the fallen kingdom of Judah, and projected backward to its origins.

The Jewish people started as a nomadic tribal confederacy. They gathered under the single god Yahweh, and made covenant with this god. However, this is no anomaly. We see the same process among the cities of Mesopotamia and the Greek poleis. When a number of villages or tribes join to form a single city-state, this takes the expression of conjointly following a new deity. This is a type of social contract. We have, then, no reason to regard the covenant of the Jewish people as exceptional.

The Jewish tribal confederacy formed in response to the presence of powerful nations (Egypt and Assyria) all around them. In other words, the confederacy was formed as a means of resisting external polities. However, once the Jewish people settled in the land of Canaan and started to engage in agriculture, they experienced a fundamental change in lifestyle from their nomadic origins. What was heretofore a tribal federation was eventually transformed under the reign of David and Solomon into an “oriental despotism” similar to the order of Egypt. That the people would switch their allegiance from the Yahweh of the nomadic peoples to the agricultural god Ba’al could be said to be the natural course of events.

In the age of Solomon, God was rendered transcendental, reflecting the expansion of the royal authority. However, this was still little more than an extension of the tribal deity. Transcendental though this God may be, were the people to be vanquished in battle, he would be discarded. This signifies a relation where the people, while placing themselves in a position of obedience, still feel entitled to coerce reciprocity from God

through offering gifts. In other words, this religion remained essentially magical.

Abandoning of God actually happened, upon the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel, which was established as the result of the split of the kingdom of Solomon after his death. God was abandoned yet again upon the consequent fall of the second kingdom, the southern kingdom of Judah. However, something unprecedented occurred among the people taken into captivity in Babylon from Judah. Though vanquished in battle and their nation lost, rather than repudiate their god, an inversion occurred whereby responsibility for events was sought on the human side. This is a decisive break with coercion of the gods and signals the disenchantment of religion. Here the rejection of reciprocity between God and humans brought about a fundamental shift in their relationship. But in another sense, the relation of human to human was also fundamentally changed.

The people taken to captivity in Babylon were largely members of the elite and literate classes, and generally engaged in commerce. Away from home in Babylon, separated from the older administrative structures including religion, and separated from their agricultural communities, they lived as individuals. It was just such individuals who came to form a new covenant community under God. This took expression as a covenant between God and the people. This resembles the process of formation of a nomadic tribal confederacy but is different. And it is also different from the thought of the biblical prophets active in the dynastic age.

These prophets criticized oppression by the bureaucracy and priesthood, the degenerate character of the people, and disparities in wealth, warning that the nation would perish if such things persisted. However, their message aimed at restoration of the old nomadic tribal order, a return to the desert—that is, a restoration of mode of exchange A, or a reciprocal community. This kind of prophet is not particular to the Jewish religion. Any place where a nomadic people were turned to agriculture under a despotic rule, and faced with the crisis of communities and nation, this kind of prophet calling for a return must have appeared. However, the call for a return to mode A by itself does not immediately lead to universal religion.

The arrangement that emerged in Babylon was a covenant community of free and equal individuals, released from tribal constraints. We can understand this as the recuperation of mode of exchange A on a higher

dimension, that is to say, mode of exchange D. The recuperation at a higher dimension requires not only the negation of modes B and C, but the negation of mode A itself. That is to say, what is required first is for people to be released from tribal society and the state. These conditions were granted by the captivity.

The Jewish exiles in Babylon were released about forty years later by the Persian Empire, after its defeat of Babylonia, and returned stateless to Jerusalem. From that point forward, the Jewish sect was transformed into a mechanism for governing the stateless people. In other words, the covenant community in Babylon was transmuted into a collective regulated by priests and scribes. The compilation of the Old Testament was further advanced at this time. Through this process, the words of the prophets, the legend of Moses, and so forth were given new meaning.

The compilation of an authorized scripture was carried out by the Jewish sect from the perspective of theocracy and was rearranged so that all laws would appear as if based in the word of God handed down to Moses. Through this process, the captivity in Babylon was cast as little more than an episode in the long history of the Jewish religion or the Jewish peoples. In this way, Babylon, the true origin of Judaism, was erased. Along with this, the fact that Judaism, once a universal religion, had fallen back to a conventional religion ruled by a priestly authority was also forgotten. As a result, Judaism came to be identified with the religion of the Jewish people.

In truth, Judaism continued to spread up to the time of Roman rule. This was not really a matter of population growth among the Jews. Rather, Judaism as a universal religion attracted many converts. For example, the sect that sprang up around Jesus grew as one faction in Judaism. They formed a collective, which was itinerant and communistic. We see a similar development in other sects that emerged at the time, such as, for example, the Essenes. These nomadic religious movements of Judaism sought to recover the covenant community of the age of Babylon.

EXEMPLARY PROPHETS

It might appear from the discussion to this point that universal religion was disclosed solely by the Jewish prophets or those in that lineage. That is not the case. In relation to this, a distinction drawn by Weber is sug-

gestive. Weber divides prophets into two types: ethical and exemplary. In the former, as with the Old Testament prophets, the prophet is inspired by God and becomes a medium to proclaim God's will, demanding that people obey God, as part of the ethical obligations entailed in that trust. In the latter type, as with Buddha, Laozi, or Confucius, the prophet is a standard to which other people aspire, who points out to people the path to religious salvation through his own example. In this way, contrary to common understanding, Weber is able to subsume some thinkers not normally thought of as religious into the category of prophets, and by doing so put the usual definition of world religion in brackets.

This leads to a further bracketing of the standard classifications of religion and philosophy. The usual distinction is that philosophy is rational, while religion is nonrational or beyond reason. Further, philosophy is Greek in origin and religion Hebraic. However, such divisions thwart our understanding not just of philosophy but of religion.

For example, the prophets of Israel spoke the word of God. However, these in fact were the words of humans. That is to say, these were not mystical communications from a sacred realm, but intellectuals reporting as the word of God realizations they had reached after passing through certain trials of understanding.⁴ Meanwhile, as to the origins of Greek philosophy, they are usually located in the natural philosophy of Ionia. This was a critique of the gods of Olympus by means of reason. Hence, it is generally understood that philosophy began as the antithesis of religion. However, Ionian natural philosophy was not atheism. It is true that these philosophers criticized the anthropomorphic gods, but such a critique was possible precisely through the acquisition of the concept of a nonanthropomorphic "one God." As with universal religion, natural philosophy came into being through a process of disenchantment. Hence, it is not plausible that those philosophers limited their inquiries into nature in a narrow sense. In this sense, Ionian natural philosophers could even be regarded as exemplary prophets.

The concept of the exemplary prophet is necessary to look at the world-historical leap that occurred simultaneously around the sixth century BCE. Philosophy appeared in Ionia at virtually the same time as universal religion appeared in Israel. In order to examine the universal significance of this simultaneity, we need to look at yet another unprecedented intellectual phenomenon arising around the same time in East Asia.

In China, the Hundred Schools of Thought became active in the Spring and Autumn period, or Warring States period. Thinkers of the Hundred Schools would travel from city to city expounding their thoughts. The condition for the receptivity of these thinkers was that it had become untenable for city-states to rely solely on the conventional wisdom of clan societies. The Hundred Schools included figures such as Laozi, Confucius, and Mozi, Legalists represented by Han Feizi, the Logicians (alternately School of Names) represented by Gong Sun Longzi, and others. In terms of contemporary disciplines, the Legalists would fall under political philosophy, and the Logicians linguistic philosophy. However, this kind of classification is meaningless. The leap that occurred in this period cannot derive exclusively from any of these categories. What is important is rather the simultaneous and competitive emergence of diverse ways of thinking.

Laozi and Confucius, though they would enter history as founders of Daoism and Confucianism, were not particularly religious themselves. It is clear that Laozi's idea of *wu wei ziran* (nonaction/naturalness) bears no relation to Daoism's later inclination toward magic, because *wu wei* or nonaction is nothing other than a negation of the coercive and magical relation to the gods.⁵ Similarly in the *Analects* we find, "Of portents, wonders, and heavenly beings, the Master passes over in silence," and "not yet even knowing life, how can one seek to know death?" Confucius, however, was neither an atheist nor a skeptic. It was simply a renunciation of the magical posture of coercion of the gods. Confucius believed in a transcendent heaven. However, this belief had prompted him rather to transfer the focus of his philosophy to the relation of person to person in this world.

Meanwhile, Laozi developed the concept of *dao*, or the Way. *Dao*, in its literal sense a material object, signifies the infinite here. What Laozi effected was a form of natural philosophy. This was also a political philosophy. Just as those who inherited the legacy of Ionian natural philosophy advocated doubting *nomos* (man-made order) and following *physis* (nature), Laozi's natural philosophy had direct political implications.

If we consider this from the perspective of modes of exchange, Laozi's thought is first a rejection of mode A, or restrictive communities. It is, second, a rejection of mode B, or rule by force. In the midst of the Spring and Autumn period, when states and communities were collapsing

around him, Confucius sought to rebuild them through “benevolence,” which means a return of mode A. Laozi rejected even benevolence; “When the Great Way falls into disuse, benevolence becomes the fashion.” “The Great Way” implies what is akin to the way of the world of nomadic peoples prior even to mode A. Then, the idea of wu wei ziran, nonaction and naturalness, can be said to point to mode of exchange D.⁶

The teachings of Laozi and Confucius were taken in later years to have opened the way for new religions. However, in both cases they were free thinkers who refused the course of religions up to that point. In this sense, there is no difference between them and the prophets of Israel or the natural philosophers of Ionia. As long as we follow the contemporary classifications that separate religion, philosophy, and science, we will never be able to recognize the world-historical leap in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. What they mark, in each case, is the emergence of mode of exchange D into human history. My effort to rethink the birth of “philosophy” in Ionia is for these reasons.

Notes

.....

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Cf. Weber: “The period of the older Israelitic prophecy at about the time of Elijah was an epoch of strong prophetic propaganda throughout the Near East and Greece . . . some of which reached into the sixth and even the fifth century. They were contemporary with Jewish, Persian, and Hindu prophetic movements, and probably also with the achievements of Chinese ethics in the pre-Confucian period.” Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fischoff (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 48–49.
- 2 Henri Bergson, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, trans. Ashley Audra (New York: Doubleday, 1935), 267.
- 3 Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 25.
- 4 According to Koichi Namiki, it was on critical examination of their accumulated knowledge and ideas that they judged it appropriate to expound them as God’s words. That is to say, it was their expressive style. “It is totally unconceivable that they did so in bad faith. Rather, they must have considered it to be discreet and effective, to efface the first person of the writer and direct their thoughts back to someone else other than themselves. If we don’t grant this it is difficult to justify the extensive involvement of compilers and commentators in the prophetic books. However, after the editing of the book is completed, things started to appear differently.” Koichi Namiki, *Kyūyaku-Seisho ni okeru Bunka to Ningen* [Culture and person in the Old Testament] (Tokyo: Kyobunkan, 1999), 28.
- 5 「無為自然」 or *wu wei zi ran*. This is a four-character phrase typical of Chinese rhetoric, with a number of possible connections between the first pair and second pair. In this case, *wu wei* or nonaction seems to lead to a “self-thusness” or naturalness. The second pair, *zi ran* or self-thusness, has come to idiomatically mean nature, but retains a logical sense in this phrase [translator’s note].
- 6 This point explains why Laozi, regarded as the founder of Daoism, has repeatedly served as the philosophical source for anarchist social movements in Chinese history.

CHAPTER 1 · IONIAN SOCIETY AND THOUGHT

- 1 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1963), 20.
- 2 Aristotle, *Politics*, book 6, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Aristotle II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 520. Note: All texts from the *Great Books* are available in a searchable database, at the Internet Classics Archive, <http://classics.mit.edu>.