The Moral and Political Naturalism of Baron Katō Hiroyuki

WINSTON DAVIS

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Send correspondence and manuscripts to:

Ms. Joanne Sandstrom, Managing Editor
Institute of East Asian Studies
2223 Fulton St., 6th Fl.
Berkeley, California 94720-2318

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Contents

Abbreviations

Often-cited Japanese Works

B3	Katō Hiroyuki. *Katō Hiroyuki no bunsho* [Selected works of Katō Hiroyuki]. Vol. 3. Kyoto: Dōmeisha, 1990.
KG	Katō Hiroyuki. *Kirisutokyō no gaidoku* [The perniciousness of Christianity]. Tokyo: Kinkōdōsha, 1911.
KH	Tabata Shinobu. *Katō Hiroyuki.* Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1959.
KKK	Katō Hiroyuki. *Kyōsha no kenri no kyōsō* [The struggle for the rights of the strong]. Tokyo: Nihon Hyōronsha, 1942 (1893).
SMS	Katō Hiroyuki. *Shizenkai no mujun to shinka* [Evolution and the contradictions of nature]. Tokyo: Kinkōdōsha, 1906.

Other Abbreviations

C	Chinese
G	German
Gk	Greek
J	Japanese
L	Latin

Preface

This monograph is a philosophical study of the later writings of the leading Social Darwinist of Meiji Japan, Baron Katō Hiroyuki (1836–1916). Most treatments of his thought in English take us up to his "New Theory of Human Rights" ("Jinken shinsetsu"), published in 1882.[1] Because most of the secondary literature (with the exception of Abosch's unpublished dissertation) are surveys of Meiji thought, they dwell on the conclusions of the thought of "the great men of Meiji," not on the arguments that led to those conclusions. One is left with the impression that these "great men" had opinions (and prejudices) but no reasons to back them up. This situation, combined with the fact that much of their thought *was* merely a translation of various European doctrines into Japanese, inclines the Western critic to dismiss Meiji intellectuals as superficial spin doctors, doctrinaire preachers, or the symbol and myth makers of the new Meiji regime. We do to them what Diogenes Laertius did to some of the most brilliant minds of ancient Greece. We turn them into talking heads delivering fragmentary, and often contradictory, oracles of interest only to the antiquarian.

Much in Katō Hiroyuki's writings justifies this kind of treatment. Like other intellectuals of the Meiji period, he was a net importer of foreign—mostly German—ideas. Like most of the other figures in the Japanese "Enlightenment," he was a scholar in the employ of the state. This situation suited him well because he had an uncanny ability to sense the direction in which the winds of "political correctness" were blowing. In the late Tokugawa

[1] See, for example, David Abosch, "Katō Hiroyuki and the Introduction of German Political Thought in Modern Japan: 1868–1883" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1964); Masaaki Kosaka, ed., *Japanese Thought in the Meiji Era* (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1969); Joseph Pittau, *Political Thought in Early Meiji Japan, 1868–1889* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

period and in early Meiji, when the regime seemed relatively open to progressive ideas, he was a progressive. After the Seinan war (1877) and the rise of the Freedom and Peoples Rights Movement, he followed the regime's move to the right and opposed the immediate establishment of a popularly elected legislature.

Katō could be dogmatic. He often makes his point by announcing that "the progress made by science since the middle of the nineteenth century *proves* thus-and-so..." He was unfair to his opponents, denouncing them as scientific illiterates and hawkers of "unscientific" or "illusory" ideas. Although he prided himself on the scientific "principles" that supported his own position, Katō's "science" was an animistic source of ultimate truth, a living oracle that declared how things really are. In his opinion, science works with hypotheses only in its infancy. Nature itself is controlled by eternal, universal "principles" (*tensoku*). He was convinced that his own philosophy rested on just these "principles."

Even though we snort, or yawn, at the graduate student who cobbles together a dissertation out of bits and pieces of Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, Lyotard, and Gloria Steinem, academic bricolage is creative in its own stodgy way. If we want to assess the value of the author's ideas, we have to see how the author puts the pieces together and what sense, if any, the final product makes. One should resist a similar temptation to dismiss Katō's work as merely the rehashing of the writings of European historians, jurists, sociologists, and evolutionists. Admittedly, only a fine, fragile line separates the philosopher from the ideologue. Today, many "postmodern" philosophers say such a line cannot be drawn at all. For them, no discourse can transcend the rhetorical use of language. However this may be, even ideologues cannot be automatically dismissed as symbol and myth makers. Like philosophers, they too use arguments. Although Katō often puts his ideas forward in a high-handed, dogmatic way, he too engages the reader in an extensive philosophical argument. Because many of his papers were occasional pieces, he often seems less systematic than he actually was. I would argue that, in spite of his many contradictions, he developed a philosophical "system" of his own. In the pages that follow, I lay out this system as he developed it after 1882. I hope that in so doing I have not made it more systematic than it was. Although it is important to assign Katō his rightful "place" in Japanese intellectual history, this is not my reason for writing this essay. Although I shall have something to say about the historical setting of his thought, my real purpose is to

recover a "missing link" in the development of Darwinist social thought as a global phenomenon. I shall therefore try to engage Katō as a thinker and determine what was really at stake in his theory of moral and political naturalism.

Philosophers today would call Katō Hiroyuki a "foundationalist." That is, he believed that it was possible to base morality and politics on knowable, natural principles. To put it grandly, Katō was fascinated by the *ontology* of politics and ethics, or what I call political and ethical *naturalism.* This, of course, was what Social Darwinism was all about: deriving the "ought" of morals and politics from the "is"—the ontological descriptions—of contemporary biology. Although classical Social Darwinism is now a thing of the past, some thinkers in the West continue to show interest in the allegedly inescapable ontology imposed upon the human race by nature or heredity or some combination of the two. These include a wide spectrum of moral naturalists from sociobiologists and ethologists to liberal neo-Thomists and secular proponents of modified versions of natural law or natural rights. I must forewarn the reader that I am skeptical about the possibility of grounding politics, rights, or morality on "nature itself."[2] Although "what is" must always be considered as one factor (among many) in moral and political decision making, our concept of "nature itself" owes as much to the human imagination as it does to scientific discovery. Indeed, a review of the global history of moral naturalism suggests that imagination usually gets the upper hand. Because we inevitably see nature through the spectacles of our own culture, what one generation regards as natural, the next may see as mere human contrivance. What is more, the ultimate job of ethics and politics may be to reject the natural course of things, to resist doing what we are naturally inclined to do, and thus to save ourselves from the violence and turmoil that nature, in its blindness, imposes upon us by inventing our own nonnatural institutions and values. Obviously, this antinaturalist position, which has been investigated by a wide range of thinkers East and West, is lethal to Katō Hiroyuki's Teutonic brand of political and moral naturalism. But more of this later.

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[2] See Winston Davis, "Natural Law: A Study of Myth in a World without Foundations" and "Natural Law and Natural Right: The Role of Myth in the Discourses of Exchange and Community," in *Myth and Philosophy,* ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 317–379.

Here I would like to express my gratitude to the National Endowment for the Humanities and to the Law Center of Washington and Lee University for their generous support of this project. I would also like to thank the Department of Religious Studies of Arizona State University for the opportunity to present an earlier version of some of the ideas developed at greater length in this essay.[3]

[3] See "The Exhaustion of Heaven: Constructing and Deconstructing Natural Rights in Meiji Japan" (Fourteenth Annual University Lecture in Religion, Tempe, Arizona, 1993). Revised sections of this essay have been used in the present study.

ONE

The Ontology of Politics and Morality

For more than two centuries, some Japanese scholars believed that Neo-Confucian naturalism properly legitimated the governance of Japan by the Tokugawa shogunate. Although alternatives to Confucian "orthodoxy" had long been available, in the early Meiji period traditional naturalism was challenged by a radically different form of naturalism claiming to sanction the rights of the people, especially their right to participate in the political process. The odd thing was that both conservatives and progressives claimed that their position was based on nature, or Heaven (C: *t'ien;* J: *ten*). It was in the context of this debate that Katō Hiroyuki first rose to national prominence. Before we plunge into the details of his thought, I would like to make a few remarks about nature as a political or moral resource.

Nature and Artifice in Western Political Thought

Robert Redfield has pointed out that a recognition of the distinction between Man and Not-Man is a universal dichotomy in human culture.[1] This has certainly been true of Western thought. In the fifth century B.C.E., the Sophists drove a wedge deep into the heart of political and ethical thought that continues to divide philosophers to this day. Plato tells us that a primary contention of the Sophists was that government "has very little to do with nature, and is largely a matter of contrivance; similarly legislation is never a natural process but is based on invention, and its enactments are not a matter of truth." The Sophists held that "goodness according to nature and goodness according to the law are two different things, and there is no standard of justice at all."[2] The

[1] *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 92.

[2] My modification of Trevor J. Saunders, trans., *Plato: The Laws* (Harmonds-

TWO

The Career of a Government Scholar

Katō Hiroyuki was born June 23, 1836, in Tajima (present-day Hyōgō prefecture). His father, Katō Masateru, was a middle-ranking samurai who served his feudal domain as an instructor in the military arts. At the age of ten, Katō enrolled in the domain's academy, where he was introduced to the standard neo-Confucian curriculum, which included lessons in the philosophical naturalism already discussed. There he was also exposed to the thought of the two major figures in the School of Ancient Studies, Ogyū Sorai and Itō Jinsai. At the age of seventeen he went with his father to Edo (modern Tokyo) to continue his study of the military arts. For a year and a half he studied in a Confucian School for Dutch Studies run by Sakuma Shōzan, a proponent of "opening the country" to the West. During a period when Katō was absent from the school, his fellow student Yoshida Shōin was arrested for trying to leave Japan. When Shōzan was forced to return to his provincial home under house arrest, Katō had to transfer to another school, run by Oki Nakamasu (Chueki). There he began his study of the Dutch language in earnest. (Part of his "instruction" at the school was to copy out entire Dutch dictionaries by hand!) In 1860, he became an assistant at the Bansho Shirabesho, the shogunal school for Western studies. There he finally abandoned military science for philosophy, ethics, and law. Hearing that Germany was the most advanced European country, he and a few other students began to teach themselves the German language by working their way through bilingual Dutch-German textbooks. At about this time, the Prussians were setting up diplomatic and commercial relations with Japan. When the king of Prussia announced that he would give the Japanese a telegraph machine, Katō and his friend Ichikawa Itsuki were selected to go to the inn where the Prussian delegates were staying and learn how to use the new machine.

THREE

Katō Hiroyuki and Ueki Emori on Natural Rights

Before we look at Katō Hiroyuki's "New Theory of Human Rights," we need to have a clear understanding of the doctrine he was opposing. There was no better example of this than Ueki Emori's theory of natural rights. Ueki (1857–1892) was one of the more interesting figures in the Freedom and People's Rights Movement. Like Baba Tatsui and Nakae Chomin, Ueki came from Tosa domain (modern Kōchi Prefecture). Unlike other Meiji activists, he neither mastered a foreign language nor traveled abroad. Instead, he simply collected and read nearly every available book in Japanese on Western politics and history. As a young man, he participated in the heady excitement of the Japanese Enlightenment, attending nearly all public meetings of the Meiji Six Society. Becoming a protégé of Itagaki Taisuke, Ueki was active in several political movements: Aikokusha, Risshisha, and Kokkai Kisei Dōmei, as well as the Liberal Party itself. After the Liberal Party disbanded, he continued to write about needed reforms, albeit in a more cautious vein. In 1892, at the age of thirty-five, he suddenly died. Some believe he was poisoned.

Ueki Emori and Natural Rights

Ueki's early life was spent in a maze of random intellectual and spiritual adventures similar to the existential zigzags of some teenagers in Japan today. Like other Meiji intellectuals, Ueki was interested in Christianity. Later in life, he collaborated with Christians, whom he valued them as fellow progressives. Occasionally, he shared lecture platforms with such evangelists as Niijima Jō of Dōshisha University. In spite of close relations with Christians, Ueki remained an atheist. In effect, he tried to reduce religion to politics.[1] When Buddhists talk about the Pure Land or Shintoists

[1] For Ueki's atheism, see his "Mushinron," *Ueki Emorishū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1990), 3:288–295. Basically, Ueki argues that because we have no sense percep-

FOUR

Katō's Theory of Evolution

Katō Hiroyuki's mature theory of social evolution was built on a firm commitment to positivism, empiricism, and utilitarianism. Like most European forms of Darwinism, his theory was also deeply infused with the spirit of nationalism. Lying at the heart of his scientistic credo was an unshakable faith in methodological and metaphysical monism (i.e., the denial of the dualism of matter vs. mind, nature vs. culture, and the physical vs. the cultural sciences) and, what is nearly the same thing, universal determinism (i.e., the strict application of the laws of causation to all phenomena). Katō liked to trace his worldview back to the monism of Spinoza and the materialism of the Epicurean philosopher and poet Lucretius.

The ultimate reality of Katō's system is the matter and energy that together constitute "world-substance" (G: *Weltsubstanz*). Aside from this, nothing else exists. The universe is therefore absolutely co-extensive with nature. Thought, values, culture, and "spirit" are all reducible to material forces. There are therefore no gods, buddhas, or spiritual realities "beyond" this Weltsubstanz. Katō believed that Lavoisier's discovery of the conservation of matter in 1789 and the discovery of the conservation of energy by Mohl, Mayer, and Helmholtz in the next century confirmed Spinoza's metaphysical vision by proving that all things behave in a purely natural, causal, mechanical way. What governs nature is the "law of substance" (*Substanzgesetz*). For convenience' sake, this law can be subdivided into the laws of the various sciences. One can, for example, legitimately speak of chemical, biological, and even sociological laws. Later, we shall see that Katō tried to extend his concept of law to include natural *ethical* laws.

Katō believed that the progress made by science since the middle of the nineteenth century "proved" that its method was the only way to study anything. From the point of view of science, religious and philosophical dualisms explain nothing. He was

FIVE

Evolution and Politics

Stung by the strong rebuttal of his original attack on natural rights, Katō Hiroyuki devoted most of the rest of his long career to the elaboration of a more carefully honed Darwinist critique of natural rights and religious ethics. Whereas Anglo-American Social Darwinism focused on the struggle for existence among individuals in a capitalist society, German Darwinists concentrated on the struggles of nations and races. Some English-speaking Darwinists, like Herbert Spencer himself, tried to mix the doctrine of individual natural rights with evolution. This attempt resulted in the magnification of individualism and the legitimation of self-interest in general. Although he was a firm believer in the priority of the ego drives, Katō was firmly opposed to theories of natural rights that made self-interest an absolute.[1] As we shall see, he was willing to accept only an individualism that had been thoroughly imbued with the values and ends of the "macromulticelled organism," that is, the nation-state.

Katō's Mature Theory of Rights

In Katō's eyes, the doctrine of natural rights was a quagmire of philosophical illusions. It assumed that nature (or God) had given rights to humans, but not to the lower animals. But nature, Katō argued, would not bestow rights on one species but not on others. Rather inconsistently, Katō held that nothing reveals nature's thoroughgoing antiegalitarianism better than its endowment of all species with unequal powers. This inequality exists both within and between the various species. Among humans, this natural endowment ultimately became the basis of a set of unequal rights. Thus rights are never a matter of fairness or justice.

[1] See, for example, *KKK*, p. 142.

SIX

Katō's Theory of Religion and Ethics

Katō Hiroyuki devoted three books exclusively to religion: *Our National Essence and Christianity* (1907), *A Mistaken Worldview* (1908), and *The Perplexities of Christians* (1909).[1] In 1911 he combined these three works into a single volume called *The Perniciousness of Christianity.*[2] Even before this two-year period in which he seemed preoccupied by religion, Katō had attacked religion at every turn. For him the choice between science and religion was an exclusive, either/or decision. Claiming to be a materialist who took his stand exclusively on natural, scientific principles, he regarded religion as the enemy of all learning. Only some aspects of Confucianism and Ninomiya Sontoku's "Way of Heaven" were exempt from his wrath. Usually overlooking the distinction between learned and vernacular forms of religion, Katō declares that all religions are irrational, base, and superstitious. "Gentlemen!" he says in the opening of *Our National Essence and Christianity,* "I intend to prove scientifically the great threat that Christianity poses to our National Essence (*kokutai*). But actually, my great distaste for religion extends beyond Christianity itself and includes all religious sects."[3]

Katō's Attacks on Religion

One reason for his blanket attack on religion was that he mistakenly believed that all religious systems of ethics—at least those originating in China, India, and the West—presuppose the existence of a mysterious and miraculous "World Ruler" (J:

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[1] *Waga kokutai to Kirisutokyō; Meisōteki uchūkan; Kirisutokyōto kyūsu.*

[2] *KG.*

[3] Cited in *KH,* p. 150. Consistent with his beliefs, Katō's funeral was conducted without benefit of clergy or religious ceremony.

SEVEN

Evolution and the Doctrine of Progress

Katō Hiroyuki was a relativist devoted to three absolutes: science, Japan, and progress. Having discussed his views on science and the nation, we turn now to what he had to say about progress. Today it is widely recognized that "progress" became the shibboleth of social and political thought of Europe and America in the second half of the nineteenth century. Until the outbreak of World War I, the notion that the human race was in all ways upward bound was widely accepted by historians, social scientists, philosophers, and intellectuals in general. There seemed good reason to be optimistic about the future of the species: the advance of science, medicine, and technology and the triumph of Western civilization throughout the world seemed to "prove" that history and evolution were synonymous with progress.

Katō Hiroyuki's writings are sprinkled with such expressions as "evolution and development" (*shinka hattatsu*) and "progress and development" (*shinpo hattatsu*). For him, progress was tied not only to the general idea of evolution, but more specifically to the struggle for survival. "Because we want evolution, we necessarily delight in the three great contradictions [of nature] and the scene of carnage (*shura no chimata*)."[1] Progress was made only when and where the strong triumphed over the weak. It was therefore tinged with ruthlessness and cruelty, especially at the primitive level of "repressive competition." But even under conditions of "egalitarian competition," progress could be made only through the struggle for survival and the defeat of the weak. The fruits of civilization rest not on altruism and peace, Katō says, but on "selfishness and conflict."[2] This truth is especially evident in political development.

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[1] *SMS*, p. 142.

[2] *KKK*, p. 259.

EIGHT

Critique

In this essay, I have outlined Katō Hiroyuki's mature thought as a philosophical system. I do not imply, however, that he was either a great or original philosopher—he was not—or that his writings were without internal contradictions—they were not. The careful reader will already have noted several glaring contradictions and many more muffled tensions in his evolutionary scheme. He celebrates equal rights in advanced civilizations, and yet he says that society will always be ruled by "aristocratic power." He says that only achieved rights are real, yet he celebrates the progress made by Japan under rights "bestowed" by the emperor. He glorifies the exploitation of slaves, women, and children as a means of "progress" but also hails the eventual triumph of the weak (once they become strong). He goes out of his way to delineate the *Machtpolitik* that characterizes international relations, and yet he predicts the advent of a peaceful Weltreich.

Although Katō tried to reduce everything to a few "monistic" principles, his doctrine was really a hodgepodge of scientism, faith in progress, Germanic evolutionism, determinism, positivism, the jurisprudence of the Rechtsstaat, and the quasi-Confucian values of Bushidō and the Meiji Restoration.[1] Although European reviewers of Katō's German book, *Das Recht des Stärkeren,* criticized our author for his lack of originality, Katō's mature theory was not completely derivatory. That he brought all of the bits and pieces of his sources into one inclusive system is impressive in its own way. Furthermore, it was no mean feat to transform the racist, Eurocentric theories of Continental evolutionism into a theory of *Japanese* development.

[1] It seems to me that his "utilitarianism" amounted to no more than a belief that the good is another name for what is "useful" to society (or to the strong who dominate it).