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Author(s)	Oda, Kazuaki
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Kuki Shuzo and His Metaphysics  
-The Problem of The Origin of Universe-

Oda Kazuaki (Osaka University)

Introduction: The structure and purpose of this paper.

This paper discusses Kuki Shuzo's metaphysics. Kuki Shuzo is not so famous even in Japan. Therefore I introduce Kuki Shuzo before discussing my main subject. Accordingly, this presentation is composed of 2 parts: Part 1 is "Who is Kuki Shuzo?" and Part 2 is "The Problem of The Origin of Universe". Throughout this presentation, I would like to provide basic information about Kuki Shuzo and show that there lived a very unique philosopher in modern Japan.

## 1. Who is Kuki Shuzo?

### 1.1. Brief biography

Kuki Shuzo was born in Tokyo in Meiji 21(1888). His father, Kuki Ryuichi (Baron) was an influential government official who mainly worked at the Ministry of Education. His family was very rich but his father and mother did not get along well. Eventually, they got divorced when Shuzo was a child. Because of this trouble, his mother got a mental illness and spent the rest of her life in the hospital. This experience certainly influenced him seriously<sup>1</sup>. He studied at the First High School and Tokyo Imperial University under the old education system. But it is his study in Germany and France for 8 years between Taisyō 10(1921) to Syōwa 3(1928) that was the most important experience in building Kuki-philosophy. He studied under Rickert, Husserl, Heidegger and Brunschvicg. He made friends with Löwith and Koyré, met Bergson twice and learned French philosophy with Sartre who was a tutor of Kuki. He built up his own philosophy based on his studies with these great philosophers. After returning to Japan in Syōwa 4(1929), he taught the history of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University as a scholar specialized in French philosophy. He published many essays and books, but in Syōwa 16(1941), he died suddenly from cancerous pleurisy. In summary, Kuki Shuzo was born in Tokyo in mid-Meiji, grown up in an upper-class family with many troubles. After growing up, he met great philosophers such as Rickert, Husserl, Heidegger, Brunschvicg and Sartre in Europe. After coming back to Japan, he taught the history of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University and died just before the Pacific War.

### 1.2. The system of Kuki-philosophy

We can classify his achievements generally into 3 fields: "Eternal Return", "Emotions of Japanese" and "Contingency".

The first field is “Eternal Return”. It is the study of time which the universe repeats the same exactly and infinitely. Some papers such as “*On time (Propos sur le temps)*”<sup>iii</sup> and “Returning time (回帰的時間)”<sup>iii</sup> belong to this field. When you heard eternal return, this term would remind you of Nietzsche. Nietzsche is Kuki’s favorite author since his school days. It seems that he was influenced by Nietzsche, but he refers to Nietzsche very little. In spite of Nietzsche’s philosophy, it is philosophies in ancient India, Greece and East Asia that he directly based in constructing “Eternal Return”. Sakabe Megumi rated “*Propos sur le temps*” very highly<sup>iv</sup> and some scholars have studied it energetically in recent years<sup>v</sup>.

The second field is “Emotions of Japanese”. It includes “*The structure of “Iki”(「いき」の構造)*”<sup>vi</sup>. Apart from this book, “An essay about Furyu (風流に関する一考察)”<sup>vii</sup>, “The genealogy of emotions (情緒の系図)”<sup>viii</sup>, “The character of Japanese style (日本的性格)”<sup>ix</sup> and some others. What he clarifies throughout “Emotions of Japanese” appears to be very clear. Many people who read “The structure of “Iki”” and say something about Japanese culture. But if you read his works carefully, you will find some questions about the validity of his arguments or intentions to write these essays.

The third field is “Contingency”. It includes “*The problem of contingency (偶然性の問題)*”<sup>x</sup>, which is his master work. Apart from this work, there are “The emotion of surprise and contingency (驚きの情と偶然性)”<sup>xi</sup>, “The logic of regarding the universe as contingency (偶然化の論理)”<sup>xii</sup>, “Contingency and fate (偶然と運命)”<sup>xiii</sup>, and more. He also applies “Contingency” to poetics and studies the possibility to introduce rhyme to Japanese poetry<sup>xiv</sup>. “Contingency” is the theme he spent his most of his effort. These papers tried to pursue not only contingency but also bigger metaphysical problems. “The problem of contingency” appears to be a very boring book, especially in the first half, which only classifies contingency, but, if you read it carefully thinking the whole of it, you will find that what he pursues throughout this book is not only contingency but also ‘being’ of the universe, and that very boring first half has an important role to present the importance of the individual. He studied the whole of the world by studying coincidence in a metaphysical way. Both in terms of quantity and quality, “Contingency” is the most important in understanding his philosophy.

He studied these three fields quoting many thinkers that include Upanishad, Buddhist Scriptures, *I Ching* (易経), Aristotle, the Epicurean, *Kojiki* (古事記), Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Neo-Kantians, Husserl, Bergson and Heidegger. He commands an extra-ordinary wide-ranging knowledge of philosophy, and makes it conform to his philosophy. It is a patchwork of great thoughts but the design is described from his unique viewpoint, such as “Contingency” and “iki”. I think we can find very unique philosophy.

### 1.3. The perspective for in the study Kuki-philosophy

It seems that all three fields are separated and aim for each subjects. There are many researches in each field, but few papers have clarified the relations between these three fields. It has been shown that there are many interesting topics but the constellation which they form has not yet. Therefore it is difficult to get the perspective of Kuki-philosophy as one whole. I would like to clarify it; in other words, I would like to study what he wanted to clarify, how he clarified it and what he could clarify. Throughout this study I would like to show the perspective of the whole Kuki-philosophy and enable it to be compared with other philosophies<sup>xv</sup>.

## 2. The Problem of The Origin of The Universe.

I would like to examine Kuki's metaphysics, especially, focusing on his idea concerning the origin of the universe at part 2. I point out the problems of "Pontigny lecture" and how it is solved in "The emotion of surprise and contingency".

### 2.1. "Pontigny lecture"

"Pontigny lecture" was delivered in 1928 in France and it was his first achievement in his philosophical career. As I said above, it is appreciated by Sakabe Megumi as the deepest point in Kuki's metaphysics<sup>xvi</sup>, and Obama Yoshinobu and Ito Kunitake each of them wrote a book on this brief lecture. "Pontigny lecture" is very difficult but their studies guide us to understand the importance of it and reveal how Kuki used the both Eastern and Western, modern and ancient philosophies. These studies only praise "Pontigny lecture" for describing the crossing of 'instant' and 'eternal'. But in my opinion, this lecture contains some other serious problems.

Kuki's theory about the eternal return is based on the idea that 'time' belongs to 'will'. He stresses it at the beginning of the lecture, by quoting Jean-Marie Guyau, Hermann Cohen, Heidegger and Bergson. He only quotes other philosophers but does not explain so much. This is an important point in his lecture.

In his theory about the eternal return, as in Nietzsche's idea, it is assumed that an instant repeats itself exactly and eternally. But there is a difference in processes for arriving at eternal return. Kuki quotes the idea of the transmigration (reincarnation) in Greek philosophy, Upanishad and Buddhism. In the world of transmigration, generally, one repeats a cycle of birth, life and death according to one's actions and consequences (Karma). If one does bad actions, he or she comes back to life as a bad creature. Kuki finds strict causality and identity in the transmigration. He thinks that we can find the eternal return when we apply this causality and identity as strictly as possible, and he concludes that "Eternal Return" is a typical case of the transmigration. This means that the sameness of the each universe in "Eternal Return" comes from causality. In summary, he thinks that time belongs to will. There are causality and identity in the transmigration in Upanishad and Buddhism. By applying

these causality and identity strictly, man can find the eternal return.

## 2.2. The passage of a grand year to another.

It is in the quotation below that I think there are problems in his metaphysics. This passage explains the moment of transmigration from one universe<sup>xvii</sup> to another. In other words, this is the explanation of the return. He expresses that it is 'will' that makes it possible.

More precisely, the problem is found, above all, in the passage of a grand year to another in the link to connect the different grand years. "As a man sways on a rope hanging from a tree above a ditch" a grand year jumps into a new grand year. Is this man a fool carried away passively by time? Is he a child who needs a "spectator"? Isn't he rather a smart magician who creates new time it-self? First of all, we have established that time belongs to will, and time does not exist where there is not will. Then, this magician in the absolute solitude is a real demon, who possesses the feat, or to be more exact, will that can finish his existence and revive into new one. Probably, between the death and the revival, his will does not exist *actually*, but it still exists *potentially*. The problem is concentrated on this notion of "potentially will". All the paradox of the notion of grand year is maybe born from the ambiguity from the thought concerning this point, but it was a fertile and happy ambiguity that has permitted the birth of a grandiose metaphysical speculation. ( I ,p.289, Italics Kuki's)

There are some strange words like "magician" or "demon" and "As a man sways on a rope hanging from a tree above a ditch", at first glance, therefore it seems that he makes jokes. But he talks here in fact, the origin of the universe and a rejection to the transcendental existence.

Let's go into detail. Kuki stresses that the passage into another grand year is carried out by a man, and rejects time, which carries on a man to the next universe, and a spectator who watches a man carrying out. Then, he claims that a man himself creates "new time itself" because time belongs to will. This means that there are no other transcendental existences, and the universe is created by a man himself. Here we can find the metaphysics of the existentialistic humanist<sup>xviii</sup> attaching importance to subjectivity and will of human and rejecting the transcendental existences. But this is a conclusion of the first half. We must notice the latter half where he confesses that he is not sure whether this is true or not. He says that what enable a man to create time is "*potentially will*", that is not *actually*. The passage of one grand year to another is the transcendental moment. Therefore we cannot recognize the will that creates a new grand year. What is more, he confesses that there is ambiguity in this metaphysics. He cannot talk about metaphysics with confidence because it is not

*actually*. At this point, he is a Kantian; human beings cannot answer metaphysical questions. But he is not only a Kantian; he thinks it is impossible to answer metaphysical questions “a fertile and happy ambiguity” and enjoys a flood of metaphysics. He sometimes mentions eternal return in other papers but he never says that eternal return is the truth. It is what he wants to believe in. He mentions it, for instance, in his essay entitled “My theory of life(人生観)”

I would like to believe in eternal return of strictly the same rather than to believe in an afterlife in usual meaning. (III,p.98)

In summary, he thinks that the universe is created by one’s will and there are no other transcendental existences. But he knows that this idea has no actual foundations.

He wrote a Japanese version of this paper with some modifications in Syowa 6(1931). In Japanese version, he neither writes like “a grand year jumps into a new grand year” nor “a smart magician who creates new time it-self”, but Time is likened to a wheel according to Upanishad and to jump or create becomes unnecessary. But in my opinion, there are more serious reasons that make him stop thinking a man’s will create time. Let’s think of this metaphysics of an existentialistic humanist.

This is too idealistic. He claims that time is together with its contents. Therefore we can say that if man creates time, he creates the whole universe. Then, a question comes up. How can his will create ‘others’? Kuki claims that *one* person creates the whole universe. This metaphysics is just solipsism. I think the most serious problem is the absence of others. He writes “this magician in the absolute solitude”, and this means that this metaphysics cannot allow the existence of others.

Kuki had been a solipsist when he delivered a “Pontigny lecture”. But as I said before, he stopped writing that man creates time by his will. It is supposed that he noticed that there are others. He introduced others to his philosophy in a form of contingency.

### 2.3. Contingency

Before getting to the main part, I would like to check the meaning of contingency. He explains it at the beginning of “The problem of contingency” :

Contingency is the negation of necessity. Necessity means that it must be so. Namely, being contains its foundations in itself in some way. Contingency means that it happens to be so, and being contains its foundations in itself insufficiently. Namely, it is being containing negation, it is being that can be absent. In other words, contingency is formed when we find being which

contains internal relation between non-being that cannot leave it. It is extreme being which stands on the interface of being and nothing. It is a state in which being is based on nothing, or a figure in which nothing invades being. (II,9)

The definition of contingency is “the negation of necessity”, “being contains its foundations in itself insufficiently” and “it is being that can be absent”. Therefore contingency is being that we cannot explain why it is. This means that the origin of the universe is contingency for human beings, since it is just “the interface of being and nothing” and we cannot recognize it.

#### 2.4. “Primal Contingency”

After “Pontigny lecture”, Kuki never claims that one’s will create time. But he had needed 10 years to reach the theory which can explain ‘others’ enough. In fact, Kuki has not thought enough metaphysical contingency when he wrote “*The problem of contingency*” in 1935. Therefore he gives supremacy to necessity. He suddenly introduces “thou” as contingency in the conclusion, but he only claims that “I” should internalize “thou” into “I”. We can find development there because he refers to “thou”. But we cannot say it is enough because he denies the others here<sup>xix</sup>.

He achieved metaphysics which can explain others in “The emotion of surprise and contingency” in 1939. It is the last paper about contingency. He gives supremacy to coincidence. If you pursue the causality thoroughly, theoretically, you will reach the ultimate cause which does not have any causes without itself, namely, it is *causa sui*. Spinoza thinks it substance, god, nature and absolute necessity, but Kuki thinks that it is not only absolute necessity but also absolute contingency because it has no foundations without itself. He calls this absolute contingency “primal contingency” which comes from Schelling. He asserts supremacy of contingency as follows.

However you remove contingency, primal contingency remains after all. Necessity is wrapped up with contingency. There is a word the encompassing (das Umgreifende)<sup>xx</sup>, contingency encompasses necessity. (III,p.174)

And it is this given actual world that we should consider as the result of the development of primal contingency. (III,174)

In summary, he concludes that the origin of the universe is primal contingency, after all.

Contingency is not somebody or somebody's belongings; namely, primal contingency is the absolute other. Therefore, Kuki says that all we can do is to be surprised when we reach primal contingency.

He does not write about "thou" or "he/she" in "The emotion of surprise and contingency", but it is obvious that he is no more a solipsist. Finally he meets others and gets surprised.

## Conclusion

In "Pontigny lecture", he had thought that one's will creates the universe. But this metaphysics of an existentialistic humanist cannot explain 'others'. Then, he changed his thought and claimed that the origin of the universe is prime contingency. This idea allowed others and he was surprised to meet the primal contingency.

We have just found the great change of his philosophy in this presentation. Lastly, I would like to show the next issues. I pointed out the problems of eternal return in "Pontigny lecture", but Kuki claims the possibility of eternal return repeatedly. He makes "Contingency" include eternal return and constructs the rhyme-study as the unification of "Contingency" and "Eternal Return". Why did he hope eternal return? And are there any changes of logic between "Pontigny lecture" and eternal return comprised in "Contingency"? There are also important issues that will clarify the system of Kuki-philosophy.

I quote Kuki Shuzo from "*the complete works of Kuki Shuzo*(九鬼周造(1980-1982)『九鬼周造全集』、岩波書店)". Roman numeral signifies the volume number and Arabic numeral signifies the page number. The translation is mine.

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<sup>i</sup> If you are interested in this trouble, please read the book and the essays below.

松本清張 (2012)『岡倉天心：その内なる敵』、河出文庫

九鬼周造(1981)「根岸」(V, pp.224-232)

九鬼周造(1981)「岡倉覚三氏の思出」(V, pp.233-239)

<sup>ii</sup> (I, pp.263-295) This is the title of the book which contains 2 lectures "The notion of times and the repetition of the times in Orient (La notion du temps et la reprise sur le temps en Orient)" and "The expression of the infinite in the Japanese art (L'expression de l'infini dans l'art Japonais)", which were given at Pontigny in France in 1928. I examine the former in this paper. For convenience, I call it "Pontigny Lecture" in this paper.

<sup>iii</sup> (III, pp.174-197)

<sup>iv</sup> 坂部恵(1990)『不在の歌：九鬼周造の世界』、TBSブリタニカ

<sup>v</sup> For examples, 小浜善信(2013)『永遠回帰の思想：九鬼周造の時間論』、神戸市外国語大学外国学研究所 and 伊藤邦武(2014)『九鬼周造と輪廻のメタフィジックス』、ふねうま舎.



vi ( I ,pp.1-85)

vii (IV,pp.60-82)

viii (IV,pp170-222)

ix (III,pp.272-292)

x ( II ,pp.1-264)

xi (III,pp.142-176)

xii ( II ,pp.353-373)

xiii ( V ,pp.25-35)

xiv If you are interested in his poetics, please read 「日本詩の押韻」(IV,pp.223-513). Contingency is a very popular topic in the literary world around Syowa 10(1935) and some novelists also publish papers on contingency (cf. 真銅正宏(2014)『偶然の日本文学小説の面白さの復権』、勉誠出版). I think there are some differences between novelists' theories and Kuki's.

xv There are interesting comparative studies between Kuki and Deleuze by Higaki Tatsuya. (cf. 檜垣立哉(2009)『賭博／偶然の哲学』、河出書房新社、Tatsuya Higaki (2014) "Deleuze and Kuki: The Temporality of Eternal Return and 'un coup de dés'", *Deleuze Studies*. Volume 8, Issue 1, Page 94-110)

xvi 坂部 *ibid.* p.112

xvii It is one cycle of the eternal return. It seems to come from Plato (Timaeus, 39D). When he wrote a Japanese version of this paper, Kuki translated it to 「大宇宙年」.

xviii The title of his collection of academic papers is 『人間と実存(Human and Existence)』.

xix This problem has been pointed out by Washida Kiyokazu and Kioka Nobuo. 鷺田清一(2002)「思考の調整について—九鬼周造の「哲学的図案」」、坂部恵・藤田正勝・鷺田清一編(2002)『九鬼周造の世界』、ミネルヴァ書房 pp.38-39  
木岡伸夫(2002)「テキストとしての偶然性」、同書、pp.242-243

xx It is a key term of Jaspers. It seems that Kuki is influenced by Jaspers.