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Tucker/Ogyu Sorai's Philosophical Masterworks

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Chapter One

The *Bendō* and *Benmei* as Philosophical Dictionaries

The most conspicuously “modern”¹ feature of Ogyū Sorai’s *Bendō* and *Benmei* is their rigorous and systematic analyses of the meanings of a graded hierarchy of philosophical concepts. Like many twentieth-century analytic philosophers, including Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, Sorai assumed that traditional philosophical problems could be resolved by means of analyzing language, its origins, usages, and meanings within a variety of texts and contexts, literary and historical.² With Sorai, however, the project of language analysis not only served as a methodology capable of defining solutions to perennial problems of philosophy, but also provided the grounds for the possibility of right government, effective self-cultivation, harmonious social organization, and the proper, status-bound expression of spirituality. Thus in the *Bendō* and *Benmei*, Sorai attempted to distinguish “the way” (*dao/michi*) not simply as a discrete concept, but as a comprehensive unity, intrinsically related to governing, self-realization, and right religiosity. Discursively, Sorai explains the way in terms of a wide variety of interrelated, first-order concepts such as “virtue,” “humaneness,” “human nature,” “the mind,” “principle,” “reverence,” “rites and music,” “ghosts and spirits,” “the great ultimate,” and many others. Given the modern philosophical methodology that Sorai uses, it is not surprising that Robert Bellah has suggested that Sorai’s *Bendō* and *Benmei* might well be credited with having “single-handedly created ‘modern philosophy’ in Japan in 1717.”³

Among East Asian philosophers and intellectual historians, Sorai’s methodology as developed in the *Bendō* and *Benmei* is hardly dated: contemporary studies of Confucian thought in Tokugawa Japan and East Asia continue to use conceptual analysis as a means of explaining core aspects of Confucian worldviews and the nuances they convey.⁴ At the same time, philosophical analysis of language is hardly new, East or West: most of the Platonic dialogues focus on the problem of our knowledge of the meanings of terms, as with “justice” in the *Republic*. Also, book 5 of Aristotle’s *Meta-*

physics analyzes the meanings of twenty-nine key notions as a prolegomenon to defining its system of metaphysics.⁵ The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), a senior contemporary of Sorai, similarly emphasized, in his *Leviathan*, the importance of coming to grips with the meanings of words. There Hobbes observed that,

truth consisteth in the right ordering of names in our affirmations [so that] a man that seeketh precise truth had need to remember what every name he uses stands for, and to place it accordingly, or else he will find himself entangled in words, as a bird in lime twigs, the more he struggles the more belimed.⁶

In the works of thinkers such as Spinoza (1632–1677), Bayle (d. 1706), Leibniz (1646–1716), Diderot (1713–1784), and Voltaire (1694–1778), any number of other examples of the methodology of conceptual analysis and definition of terms can be cited.

Nor was this methodology, in Tokugawa Japan, unique or original to Sorai's two *Ben*. Maruyama Masao has characterized Tokugawa Confucianism as "a set of categories through which people saw their world." Amplifying Maruyama's insight, Marius Jansen added that "in Tokugawa times those categories began with loyalty" and "went on to include filiality, obligation, duty, harmony, and diligence."⁷ Tetsuo Najita has similarly noted "the plurality and range of eclectic conceptualizations" in Tokugawa thought.⁸ Highlighting the conceptual nature of Neo-Confucian teachings in particular, William Theodore de Bary has suggested, more generally, that as an East Asian "system of thought undergoing historical development," Neo-Confucianism was expressed through "a tangible body of discourse with definable characteristics." Of these, de Bary mentions "names and concepts" conveying the way such as "humaneness," "reverence," "filiality," "innate knowing," and "the non-finite and the supreme ultimate."⁹

The focus on concepts and conceptual explication is traceable to the *Analects* where Confucius and his disciples are presented exploring the meanings of novel notions that later became seminal elements of Confucian discourse such as "humaneness," "the way," and "the prince."¹⁰ More remotely, conceptual explication, albeit of a different, more ideological sort, appears operative in the ancient Chinese classic the *Book of History* (*Shu-jing*), where the newly risen leaders of the Zhou dynasty are cast explaining their conquest of the Shang regime in terms of a new notion, *tianming*, or "the decree of heaven." According to the Zhou leaders, when a dynastic line forsakes its virtue (*de/toku*) by neglecting its sacrificial duties and disregard-

ing the welfare of the people, then heaven (*tian/ten*) withdraws its legitimizing decree (*ming/mei*) and appoints anew a virtuous ruler to assume responsibility for the welfare of the realm.¹¹ For the Zhou, justifying assumption of sovereignty involved conceptual explication and, in the process, articulation of a new political philosophy.

Buddhists also engaged in language analysis, though of a more deconstructive sort. Nāgājuna's (ca. 150–250) Mahayana classic, the *Mūlamadyhamakakārikā* (Treatise on the middle path), for example, purports to establish the essential emptiness (i.e., non-self existing nature) of all conceptual constructs, including notions such as suffering, nirvana, the *tathāgata* (the Thus-come-one, i.e., Buddha), and so on.¹² Long before the Tokugawa period, Kūkai (774–835), recognizing that “the *tathāgata* reveals his teachings by means of expressive symbols,” supposedly authored treatises on the meanings of words such as “The Meanings of the Word Hūm” (*Un jigū*), explaining the sacred syllable in the esoteric, often mystic jargon of Shingon Buddhism.¹³ William R. La Fleur has called attention to the medieval Buddhist need for “aesthetic modes” of discourse reversing “the symbolizing habit of the mind,” adding that the aesthetic approach “deliberately rejects the attempt to discover ‘meanings.’” Yet still, La Fleur notes, semantic tensions resulted among those trying to express original enlightenment (*hongaku*) as they were compelled to construct and demolish “the system of Buddhist symbols.”¹⁴ Simply put, medieval Buddhists disdained reverence for language and meaning, but could not communicate the same without them.

Yet what one finds in Sorai's *Bendō* and *Benmei* is not an occasional esoteric excursion into the explication of conceptual meaning. Instead, these masterworks engage in rigorous and systematic analyses of a hierarchy of concepts, some eighty different notions in the case of the *Benmei*. In this respect, the *Bendō* and *Benmei* can be referred to as philosophical dictionaries.¹⁵ Given the evident systematic complexity of the two *Ben*, it should come as no surprise that they were not literary inventions ex nihilo, but instead emerged from a fairly discrete East Asian genre with a substantial and complex textual past, here referred to as that of philosophical dictionaries or lexicons—or *jigū*,¹⁶ to give them a Japanese name. This introduction seeks to illuminate Sorai's philosophical masterworks, not simply by rehearsing, yet again, Sorai's philosophical semantics, term by term, but rather by situating the two *Ben* within their generic context.

East Asian philosophical dictionaries, or *jigū*, offered systematic analyses of the meanings and usages of an integrally related set of philosophical

notions. Through the mid-Tokugawa period, their conceptual stock typically included terms such as “the way,” “human nature,” “human feelings,” “principle,” “the mind,” “destiny,” “yin and yang,” “ghosts and spirits,” and the like. Although there have been no previous studies of the genre in Tokugawa intellectual history,¹⁷ it was the most widely appropriated literary form for conceptually focused philosophical discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Many of the masterworks of early-modern Japanese philosophy—Yamaga Sokō’s (1622–1685) *Seikyō yōroku* (Essential teachings of sagely Confucianism, 1665); Itō Jinsai’s (1627–1705) *Gomō jiggi* (The meanings of the *Analects* and *Mencius*, 1705); and Sorai’s two *Ben*—were written in this genre. Although based on broad learning in Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, these masterworks were, most saliently, critical revisions of a late-Song-dynasty Neo-Confucian lexicon, Chen Beixi’s (1159–1223) *Xingli ziyi* (The meanings of Neo-Confucian terms; J. *Seiri jiggi*, ca. 1223). It would be naive to suggest that Beixi’s *Ziyi* was the only significant text from which these complex masterworks emerged. At the same time, substantial evidence suggests that the form, method, and much of the content of Sorai’s two *Ben* derived primarily from Beixi’s *Xingli ziyi*. Largely the same can be said regarding many other quite significant lexicographic treatises produced in the Tokugawa period.

Dictionaries often seek to legislate semantic orthodoxy via their pronouncements. Yet in Tokugawa Japan, the genre of philosophical lexicography never generated anything like a semantically monolithic intellectual culture. Instead it served as an open medium, structurally and methodologically, for contesting philosophical terrain wherein increasingly diverse semasiologies of the Confucian way vied for patrons and authority. In Sorai’s case, the two *Ben* purportedly sought to define not simply the “Confucian” way, but an allegedly more ancient level of discourse, “the way of the early kings,” also referred to as “the way of the sages.” From the modern standpoint, the genre can be viewed as facilitating the early-modern rise of intellectual debate and discussion through the expression of increasingly critical conceptual visions of the reality. Yet indulging in semantic debate and scholastic exchange was hardly the explicit, contemporary motive for production of *jiggi*. Tokugawa philosophers of language such as Sorai envisioned their efforts more monumentally, in terms of the rediscovery and promotion of the true way. Insofar as these projects decisively affected the political realm, society, and the person, the systematic conceptual analyses expressing them served as essential guides for those seeking to promote

self-cultivation, realization of social harmony, and the institution of right political order.

Of the many different versions of Beixi's *Ziyi* that circulated in East Asia, the most important for Tokugawa Japan was the 1553 Korean edition, apparently based on the late-Song-dynasty Yongjia edition (ca. 1226).¹⁸ In Japan, the most decisive factor in the popularization of Beixi's *Ziyi* and the quickening of the genre of the philosophical lexicon was the publication of Hayashi Razan's (1583–1657) *Seiri jiggi genkai* (Vernacular explication of Beixi's *Ziyi*, 1659). Largely as interpreted by Razan in ordinary, kana-based Japanese, Beixi's *Ziyi* presented early-Tokugawa thinkers with a useful model and methodology for creative emulation, one providing a template for articulating new understandings of East Asian philosophical semantics. By amplifying important conceptual discussions with additional textual material and analysis, Razan's text went beyond simply reiterating Beixi word for word. Significantly, many of Razan's interpretive comments took issue with the *Ziyi*, calling attention to portions of the text that it declared "questionable."¹⁹ Razan admired Beixi's *Ziyi*, but like all Neo-Confucians he stood ready to doubt anything that was questionable.

Thinkers such as Sorai, rather than simply imitating the *Ziyi* or passively recapitulating what Beixi said, did something much more interesting: they appropriated the blueprint of the *Ziyi* as a basis for producing new conceptual studies by which comprehensive, politically nuanced philosophical worldviews could be expounded. These came to compete with one another, albeit in often muted, even subterranean ways, in the burgeoning, though at times dangerous, marketplace of Tokugawa ideas. And they often challenged, more subtly, the theoretical underpinnings of the authoritarian military rule set forth by the Edo shoguns. Though never nearly as confrontational as Western political treatises dating from the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries (John Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* comes to mind here), *jiggi* were significant vehicles for expressing conceptually defined systems of meaning eruditely contesting—or in Sorai's case, energetically supporting—the authority of the political order decreed by the shogunate. Cast in grander terms, Tokugawa *jiggi* were literary mediums by which empires of meaning were distinguished for the sake of legislating well-defined parameters vis-à-vis humanity, ethics, society, and the metaphysical realm. Most problematical, from the perspective of the shogunal regime, was that these semantic parameters could be construed as theoretical limits of the otherwise scarcely restrained prerogatives of samurai rule.

On the other hand, philosophical lexicons could, as Sorai's two *Ben* did, define philosophical terms so as to maximize the political authority of the ruling elite while reducing the remainder of society to roles involving compliance and performance of duty.

The sharp political edge of the genre derives from a controversial but noteworthy passage in the *Analects* where Confucius explains that if given authority to govern a state, he would first ensure that language was used correctly (*zhengming/seimei*).²⁰ Beixi, Razan, Sokō, Jinsai, Sorai, and other philosophers of language who worked in the genre assumed that by recovering the right meanings of fundamental philosophical terms, they were establishing the semantic grounds for the possibility of a well-governed sociopolitical order. This study emphasizes that these thinkers were not defining terms simply out of their academic passion for philology, textual exegesis, or lexicographic clarity. Rather they were engaging as well in an essentially political activity, one that must be construed as directly addressing the existing polity or, more seriously, potentially subverting it. One of the earliest philosophical dictionaries in Tokugawa Japan, Sokō's *Seikyō yōroku*, landed its author in indefinite exile shortly after its publication in Edo in 1665. Modern readers of the *Seikyō yōroku* are not likely to understand what was so offensive about that text unless they realize that among Confucians, defining terms was considered an inherently political activity, one suggesting that the lexicographer was laying theoretical foundations for practical rule. An earlier study of Itō Jinsai's *Gomō jigi* emphasized the humanistic, "people-centered" nature of the Confucian way expounded by that Kyōto philosopher.²¹ This study interprets Sorai's philosophical writings along very different lines: rather than having been written for "the people," the two *Ben* primarily address the concerns of the upper echelons of the ruling samurai elite, most particularly those of the Tokugawa shogunate. Instead of emphasizing quasi-liberal notions such as self-cultivation through study and learning, or the individual's quest for humaneness as the highest possible human achievement, the *Bendō* and *Benmei* advise the ruling elite, and them alone, on how to govern the realm effectively and authoritatively, and in doing so to provide, along utilitarian lines, the greatest degree of peace, security, and personal development for all.

The two *Ben* outline a plan not for a liberal, enlightened realm of broadly educated, politically concerned people, but for an absolute prince intent on ruling on behalf of his realm, checked only by his political responsibility to promote peace and stability through instituting the way of the early kings. Most specifically, the prince promotes the way of the early kings,

an amalgam of rites, music, penal laws, and administrative structures, that the people, his subjects, must follow, without doubts or questioning. If they do their duty in following the early kings' way as set forth for them, then much as in Plato's ideal *Republic*, where justice prevails when each performs his proper role, so in Sorai's authoritarian utopia will peace and stability be the by-products. Disturbingly, at least to modern minds, Sorai makes it clear that it is unnecessary for people to understand or even attempt to understand the early kings' way. Rather, their only concern should be following the sagely paradigm presented before them; by doing so they will complete the specific talents innate to their divergent human natures.

The two *Ben* thus express, for modern readers, one of the least agreeable versions of Confucianism. Not only is it an authoritarian system meant for rulers, but it allows virtually no room for personal doubt. Ironically, this is true even though the *Bendō* and *Benmei* are arguably outgrowths of the invitation to doubt, encouraged among those pursuing Neo-Confucian learning, as a means to making significant progress in it. Extolling the virtues of doubt, Zhu Xi remarked, "Those with major doubts make much progress."²² Here Zhu Xi affirmed a theme that Lu Xiangshan (1139–1193), one of his own critics, also affirmed: "in learning we should be anxious when we have no doubts."²³ Seventeenth-century Tokugawa Neo-Confucians were familiar with these views: Kaibara Ekken's (1630–1714) *Taigiroku* (Record of grave doubts), quotes and then amplifies these remarks, justifying the legitimacy and intellectual value of critical doubt and questioning. Ekken adds that "doubting is an indispensable part of the way of learning."²⁴ While it might be objected that "doubts" are one thing and "criticism" another, following his recognition of the value of doubt, Ekken offered a systematic critique of Zhu Xi's thought. At no point, however, did Ekken indicate that he did not wish to be identified with Zhu Xi's system. Indeed, his overall project was to record his critical doubts, which he had been unable to resolve, so that someone wiser could clarify them. Similarly, Sorai's two *Ben* can be read as a systematic critique of Zhu Xi's ideas issuing not from a determination to destroy Neo-Confucianism generally, but instead as outgrowths of the overall encouragement of doubt found within it. Yet in consistently emphasizing the importance of following the early kings' way, without necessarily understanding it, the *Bendō* and *Benmei* highlight one of the least broad-minded lines in the *Analects*: that people can be made to follow, yet not necessarily understand, things (such as the way).²⁵ While attributed to Confucius and typically interpreted as a statement regarding common people and their relationship to the way, this recognition of peo-

ple's capacity for uninformed compliance hardly expresses the *Analects'* overall approach to human understanding or the way. Instead, Confucius more typically encouraged his disciples to hear, study, and practice the way to gain full comprehension of it.

In this respect, the two *Ben* cannot, in any facile manner, be equated with Confucianism: the latter was, in terms of philosophical expression, a broader, more potentially liberative set of teachings, often offering high ethical ideals for rulers and the people so as to bring out of human nature the best in humanity. This is most evident in the Confucian and Neo-Confucian emphasis on learning and education as a means to self-cultivation and self-perfection in sagehood. Historically the Neo-Confucian curriculum was neither narrow nor circumscribed: students were encouraged to read widely in philosophy, history, and poetry. With Sorai, people are implored for the most part to follow the ancient rites and music, often mentioned in tandem with the penal laws and administrative institutions established by the sage kings of antiquity, supposedly the only true sages that the world ever had and ever would have. The early kings attained that status, according to Sorai, because they laid the foundations of civilization, and in that capacity, could never be matched, much less surpassed. Rather than learning about the way through reading, reflection, inquiry, and discussion, Sorai's *Bendō* and *Benmei* in particular²⁶ exhort people to engage in education via unquestioning practical compliance with the rites, music, penal laws, and administrative institutions that the ancient sages founded.

According to the two *Ben*, the ruling elite of the day—the shogunal regime in Sorai's case—is inferior to and yet still the empirical representative of the ancient sages in history. Just as people of the realm are expected to follow the rites, music, penal laws, and administrative institutions of the ancient sage kings, so would the Tokugawa shoguns be expected to promote and rule through political forms established by the sage kings. Other than the Six Classics, book learning is mocked as an egregiously misguided activity that wastes the time and resources of those governing. Instead of widely studying books and discussing them, the two *Ben* suggest that people need do nothing more than repeat verbatim the words of the sages, reenact their rites, and abide by the regulations they established. People should do this not as part of a quest for sagehood, but to realize whatever particular capacities for virtue reside within them. Sagehood, as Sorai's *Bendō* and *Benmei* remind their readers, has never been achieved by anyone other than the ancient sage kings, and never will be. Here Sorai's views differ markedly from those of the majority of Neo-Confucians, who asserted that through

self-cultivation and book learning, attaining sagehood was fully possible for anyone.

In the early 1940s, Maruyama Masao's (1914–1996) writings, later published as *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, cast Sorai as the pivotal figure in the development of the modern political consciousness, that is, a divided consciousness, separating the realms of artifice and nature, the political and ethical, and the public and private.²⁷ Overall this study suggests that Sorai's thought was not a modernizing force, but rather one appealing anachronistically to the fundamentals of an archaic political tradition for the sake of fashioning an ideology of shogunal absolutism.²⁸ If there is a conspicuously modern element of any sort in Sorai's *Bendō* and *Benmei*, it resides primarily in their respect for semantic clarity and conceptual analysis, a respect shared by any number of twentieth-century philosophers who affirm the ability of language analysis to resolve the problems of philosophy. Though differing profoundly in detail and theory, Sorai and twentieth-century thinkers such as Russell and Wittgenstein are at one in their belief that analysis of language is crucial to interpreting metaphysical and historical problems rightly.

Interpretations of Sorai's Thought

In portraying Sorai as a radical opponent of Zhu Xi-style Neo-Confucianism (Shushigaku) who demolished its "mode of thought," Maruyama grouped Sorai with Yamaga Sokō and Itō Jinsai as the so-called school of ancient learning (*kogaku*). In doing so, Maruyama drew on the interpretations of Inoue Tetsujirō's (1855–1944) *Philosophy of the Japanese School of Ancient Learning* (*Nippon kogakuha no tetsugaku*), which, following the Sino-Japanese War, cast the three very different thinkers, Sokō, Jinsai, and Sorai, as a unified—and uniquely Japanese—force responsible for vanquishing the supposedly slavish Zhu Xi-style Neo-Confucian learning, which expected Japanese adherents to serve as "spiritual slaves of Zhu Xi."²⁹ Though Maruyama strongly opposed the nationalistic rhetoric Inoue advocated, he still appropriated Inoue's triadic division of early-Tokugawa thought into a school of Zhu Xi, a school of Wang Yangming, and a school of ancient learning, with the latter distinctively Japanese movement presiding over the disintegration and dissolution of the earlier Chinese thesis and antithesis.

Maruyama's claims regarding Tokugawa Neo-Confucianism have been challenged by Wm. Theodore de Bary and a host of others. In particular, de Bary has shown how Sorai's thought issued from various doctrinal alter-