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## An Age of Practical Wisdom: Social Science and the Revitalization of Japan

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### 1. Science, Technology and the Revitalization of Japan

Science and technology have been advancing at a sometimes alarming speed. When I entered university in the late 1960s, we didn't even have photocopiers. The student activist fliers were mimeographed, and our seminar abstracts were blueprinted, which was a lengthy process. I remember being late for one graduate seminar on the day I was supposed to make a presentation. I put great effort into composing the abstract, but it was very long, and the sluggish blueprinting took so much time that I not only missed the beginning of the class but was late by more than 30 minutes. I still remember how my steps echoed uncomfortably loudly as I dashed through the silent hallway, all the other students being in their classrooms.

Times have certainly changed since then. Speedy photocopiers have already been outmoded by computers, which can send emails overseas in an instant. Remembering the countless times I handwrote a final version of my report and made a mistake at the end of the 400-character manuscript paper, or my innumerable errors while typing English and having to start over from the beginning, the current situation seems unbelievably convenient. Our progress as a result of the innovations and evolution of information technology is truly amazing, even frightening.

But has human society progressed along with its technology? It is only recently that the Cold War ended and we began talking about the "end of history". Our society does not seem to be advancing as surely as our technology. Wars, terrorism and other armed conflicts never seem to end, and new incidents occur day after day. Notably, tension is increasing between Japan and China as well as between Japan and Korea. How long ago was the day that these three countries were discussing the possibility of an "East Asian Community"?

I think that in today's troubled setting we see a growing sense that social science is relatively useless compared to the resplendent practicality of natural science. Japan is now vigorously encouraging development of scientific technologies and human resources in those fields in order to recover from its

years of sluggish economy. While the country is allocating sizable funds to achieve such targets, it does not seem to expect much from social and human science. As evidenced by its number of Nobel laureates, the quality of Japanese science and technology remains extremely high. Both the government and private industry have invested enormously to support technological development, and I think we have seen a fine level of achievement. However, the Japanese economy remains slow despite such efforts, so we might well question whether the focus has been placed appropriately; the impediment may lie elsewhere. We need to reconsider our approach to the revitalization of the Japanese economy and long term progress for Japan.

Before discussing this matter further, I would like to step back for a moment to present my thoughts on the nature of natural science and social science, which are intrinsic to Japan's future direction.

## **2. Natural Sciences and Society**

No one is likely to deny that research and application in the natural sciences—biology, physics, chemistry, astronomy, the earth sciences, mathematics—are progressive and beneficial and that they have served mankind immensely well. This must be obvious as we look at the great achievements of natural science. Moreover, these have been both objectively good and for the most part universal.

The natural sciences study natural phenomena, discover their laws, and then use these discoveries for human innovation. Their descriptions are objective and universally true. Apples fall uniformly from trees in Japan, the United States and China: the law of gravitation is universal.

It is in fact a popular assumption that a science by definition pursues such universality, such generality, and that therefore social science, which is not based on universal laws, cannot be called a science. Karl Marx tried, in anticipation of or as a result of such criticism, to reconstruct social science, asserting that human society has its laws as well. His contraposition of “scientific socialism” against “utopian socialism” and his concept of historical materialism as a scientific methodology for the study of society and history are probably based on this fundamental understanding.

However, it is not necessarily appropriate to draw social science closer in nature to natural science, because the laws themselves are not decisive factors in natural science either. The English historian E. H. Carr has argued this in his book *What Is History?* (1962):

”As we have seen, scientists are no longer so eager as they used to be to talk about the laws of nature. The so-called laws of sciences which affect our ordinary life are in fact statements of tendency, statements of what will happen other things being equal or in laboratory conditions. They do not claim to predict what will happen in concrete cases. The law of gravity does not prove that that particular apple will fall to the ground: somebody may catch it in a basket. The law of optics that light travels in a straight line does not prove that a particular ray of light may not be refracted or scattered by some intervening object.” (p. 62)

This is a very interesting point. Even the laws of physics can be “refracted” by various incidents and obstacles in the real world, in nature or human society, and therefore it becomes important to study the various phenomena of society and make specific ethical, normative and political decisions as appropriate.

Science has value for us in relation to the society in which we live. That is why we sometimes fear that it could be dangerous if it advanced unhindered along the line of its own logic. A good example of an unhappy result is the Fukushima nuclear power disaster we experienced in 2011, and certainly the same can be said of incidents that have occurred in medicine and other scientific fields. Science needs something more than scientific logic alone.

Shown below are the “seven social sins” published by Mahatma Gandhi in a weekly journal in English called “Young India” on Oct. 22, 1925 and carved on his memorial in Rajghat, Delhi. They delineate our perils in a clear and persuasive way.

- Politics without principles
- Wealth without work
- Pleasure without conscience
- Knowledge without character
- Commerce without morality
- Science without humanity
- Worship without sacrifice

While all of these are very compelling and have profound implications, the one that most concerns the subject of this article is “Science without humanity”. As shown by such examples as nuclear weaponry, this is an increasingly serious problem for the world today. We must particularly note his use of the adjective “social” for these sins: they are social sins, not human sins. Gandhi probably titled these with the Christian “seven deadly sins” in mind, but his association of sin with society shows his perspicacity as a peaceful revolutionary of the 20th century.

The social evils identified by Gandhi warn us of the danger of ignoring social norms. Then, what is missing? I would say it is the practical wisdom contained in social science and other humanities-related areas, because social phenomena, including the sense of norms, are the areas within its range of expertise.

### **3. Knowledge and Practical Wisdom**

Nevertheless, there remains the question of the academic rigor of the social sciences compared to that of the natural sciences. “What kind of knowledge does social science represent?” the natural scientist might ask.

Of course, social science represents solid knowledge. Despite the characteristic differences, the natural and social sciences are both important fields of valid knowledge. I think the concepts of “knowledge” and “practical judgment” identified by Aristotle explain this well.

Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* outlines the five virtues of thought which can disclose truth, and two of these are knowledge (“episteme”) and practical wisdom or practical judgment (“phronesis”). While knowledge is logical and mathematical and deals with universal subjects, practical wisdom is a faculty directed toward living well (“eu zen”) and deals with the individualities of the world we meet. The goal of such deliberation is action to deal with human events that can be either general or particular.

In this sense, practical or constructive wisdom is clearly a virtue required for “household, economy [and] national politics”, as Aristotle would have it. Knowledge deals with universal and logical subjects (the domain of the natural sciences), while practical wisdom attacks the complex and often obscure problems of human society.

One difference between the qualities of knowledge and practical judgment is the ages at which they are acquired. Even children understand obvious and simple physical events, but often have trouble comprehending complex social ones. While young people are capable of remarkable achievements in the natural sciences, they need experience to succeed academically in the more “refracted” areas of social and human science.

“What has been said is confirmed by the fact that while young men become geometers and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar from experience, but a young man has no experience, for it is length of time that gives experience, ...” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*. Translated by W. D. Ross.)

Of course, this wisdom cannot be acquired solely through passive experience. It requires conversion of one's experiences into general and universal knowledge, or at least such an orientation. A study that qualifies for the name of social science can be founded when these achievements have been attained.

#### **4 . What is general in the unique**

Even if the phenomena of society are complex and unique, their study cannot be called an art or a science if they are studied out of context. All academics, including those in social and human science, aim at generality and universality. E. H. Carr again explains this succinctly.

”The very use of language commits the historian, like the scientist, to generalization. ... The historian is not really interested in the unique, but in what is general in the unique. “(op. cit., p.57)

It is of course possible to replace the word “historian” in Carr’s statement with “social scientist”. While social scientists study the oddities and complexities of human society and examine the details of individual phenomena, they never lose their orientation toward and connection with a more general understanding. Social science persistently pursues these goals.

According to “History as a dialogue with oneself” by Kinya Abe (published by Chikuma Bunko), Senroku Uehara, a great historian who taught at Hitotsubashi University, always asked his students in his seminars, “So what did you make of that?” We can understand this question as a prime instance of academic generalization, even though it actually has deeper implications. Instead of simply presenting facts, Uehara encouraged his students to explore them further in the direction of historical and social universality and to think deeply about the relationships among greater issues.

When constructive wisdom encounters intricate phenomena, it organizes them and deals with individual issues from a greater or more unified viewpoint. This wisdom is not something one is born with; it must be cultivated through training and experience and developed to more sublime levels. When the English King James I and the courts clashed over an issue during his absolute monarchy, the king said that he thought the law was founded upon reason, and that he and others had as much reason as the judges. In response, Sir Edward Coke advocated for the Common Law:

“... His Majesty was not learned in the laws of his realm of England and causes which concern the life or inheritance or goods or fortunes of his subjects; they are not to be decided by natural reason, but by the artificial reason and judgment of law, which law is an act which requires long study and experience before that a man can attain to the cognizance of it ...” (*The Constitutional History of England – A Course of Lectures Delivered* by F. W. Maitland, LL.D, Cambridge: at the University Press, 1919, p.268)

The subject of social science is the society in which mostly ordinary people live, so unlike the case of natural science, it is not always easy to qualitatively distinguish laymen’s opinions from professional expertise. However, if “artificial reason” can be cultivated through long study and experience, that would be the wisdom in the art of social science. International law, which is mainly based on customary international practice, would be more appropriately interpreted by “artificial reason” developed through long years of experience than by natural reason. Societies and nations would be endangered if practical or artificial wisdom did not exist.

## **5. An Age of Practical Wisdom**

The idea of danger reminds me of a quote regarding the history of the Showa era.

“Philosophical pacifism is a wonderful thing. However, it is the ability to make coolheaded, comprehensive measurements and comparisons that keep a nation from taking perilous steps. That is the quality desired in politicians and members of the fourth estate. Unfortunately, however, I have never seen anyone like that.” (*Kaido Wo Yuku 42: Miura Hantou Ki* by Ryotaro Shiba, Asahi Bunko, p.243)

This excerpt is from a chapter called “Showa No Kaigun (The Navy of the Showa Era)”. Shiba continues, “When a nation collapses, everyone seems to gather to take part in it. That’s what the Showa era army did. They did not have the same ability to assess reality that was the army’s strength in the Meiji era.” He compares the army and the navy of the Showa era, and according to Shiba, the difference between them was evident. The army “was modernized in the Meiji era, but ingrained customs remained”, while “the navy was a foreign civilization from the very start”, a scion of the British Navy.

“In addition, the navy never built morale or furnished exemplars for its sailors. The only principle was ‘Naval officers should be cultivated’.” (op. cit., p.226)

“Cultivated” implies rationality, a broad perspective and intelligence, as well as the ability to act on such judgments and bear responsibility for the outcome. It means to compare self and others coolheadedly without depending on an ideal, to make due preparations, and then to render judgment. I think this quality is comparable to practical wisdom.

I don’t know whether the navy was actually as cultivated as Shiba suggests, but I value the sophistication that he envisaged. Natural science is clearly in the domain of knowledge. However, society needs the assistance of practical wisdom, for even light refracts in this world. It is important that knowledge and practical judgment connect to better the human condition.

Human society, with its unique and complex features, cannot be examined or described easily; nor can universal laws or principles be established for it. However, it is possible to keep asking “why”, to identify complicated social phenomena and to pursue reasonable solutions based on experiential data, materials and constructive wisdom. It is also possible for social science to play an important role in applying the achievements of the natural sciences to society, business, politics and economics. Although light travels in a straight line, it refracts in the prism of our social system. Literate specialists who understand the system and appropriately interpret this refracted light to benefit the cultural environment and mankind are clearly needed.

All of the sciences have the potential to resonate with each other. We must make them ring in unison. The effect will be far greater than  $1 + 1 = 2$ ; it will be synergetic. To make the most of the achievements of the natural sciences and produce a positive impact on society, it is important that we understand and direct them appropriately. Therefore, those who study the social sciences must also acquire the ability to understand the natural sciences and resonate with them, to refine their sensibilities and to endeavor to design products, institutions, societies and nations on such bases.

In social science, this ability is termed “conceptual skill”. This skill, required of all leaders, might more concretely be described as “design skill”. To realize a design or concept, coolheaded calculation, eloquent communication and tough negotiation skills are essential. With their help, the benefits of technology can greatly enhance our society.

Obviously, cultivated human resources with design skills and practical wisdom are essential in politics and diplomacy too. In view of the recent territorial disputes in East Asia and at national borders in Europe and Asia, the ability to create a grand design, “to make coolheaded, comprehensive measurements and comparisons”, persistence in solving problems flexibly and appropriately, and consideration of international laws—in other words, practical wisdom—is desperately needed.

However, these skills and abilities have not been cultivated adequately. I suggest that the government increase investment in such human resource development in order to ensure more effective revitalization of the country, mobilize the wisdom to maintain peace in East Asia, and expand Japan’s potential for greater participation in the challenges facing the world. Today Japan needs constructive judgment in all fields of politics, economy and society. I call our age an “age of practical wisdom” because that is what is needed for our times.

However, I also titled this article “Age of Practical Wisdom” in the hope that such wisdom will function effectively to create peace and abundance today, so that the second decade of the 21st century will be praised by future generations for its wise resolution of the difficult issues that confronted it.

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Professor Yamauchi was born in Otaru, Hokkaido, Japan, in 1949. He graduated from Hitotsubashi University Faculty of Law in 1972 and completed his PhD in Law at the Graduate School of Law in 1977. After becoming a professor at Hitotsubashi University he held such positions as Dean of Students, Dean of the Faculty of Law, and Board Member. In 2004 he became leader of Hitotsubashi University’s COE program, “Center for New European Research: Conflict and Settlement,” a national project sponsored by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. He also administered the EU Institute in Japan and the EU Studies Institute in Tokyo. He became Executive Vice President for Finance and Social Outreach at Hitotsubashi University in 2006, and President of Hitotsubashi University in December 2010. His areas of specialization are legal history, medieval European legal history, and the history of legal culture. His publications include *A History of the Legal Conception of Looting: Man, War and Law in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, Tokyo Daigaku Shuppankai, 1993; a co-edited volume with Makoto Ikema, Yoshio Inoue and Tamotsu Nishizawa, *Hitotsubashi University 1875-2000*, Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000; and another with Aritsune Katsuta and Seiichi Mori, *Introduction to European Legal History*, Minerva Press, 2004. He received the Suntory Academic Award for *Crusades to the North*, Kodansha, 1997.

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