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Making Sense of Ourselves with Others: Review of *American Philosophy in Translation* by Naoko Saito

Review of Naoko Saito, *American Philosophy in Translation*

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What does it mean to do American philosophy? Not only has Naoko Saito saved this question from triviality and narcissism, but she has been developing a fruitful response from the unusual vantage point of a Japanese scholar. For her entire academic career, Saito has been studying the rich legacies of originary, nineteenth-century transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and twentieth-century pragmatists such as John Dewey, and examining how their work was recently inherited, synthesized, and revitalized by their compatriot philosospher, Stanley Cavell. Early fruits of her scholarship were articulated in her 2005 text, *The Gleam of Light: Moral Perfectionism and Education in Dewey and Emerson* (New York: Fordham University Press). Fourteen years later, the publication of her current book represents a culminating, accomplished milestone in her ongoing inquiry.

The title, *American Philosophy in Translation*, telegraphs to us the book's rhetorical design and its main thesis. We are being invited to care about something called "American philosophy." This designation and invitation comes from a seeming outsider: a Japanese philosopher. Evidently, Saito owes her appreciation of this philosophy to her sustained and cumulative work of translating it into her native language of thought. She accordingly affirms that the very capacity of the philosophy to stimulate such translation is precisely what it most has to offer us, natives and foreigners alike. American philosophy helps us understand that exercising this activity in the deepest sense strengthens the health of democratic societies. Although I admire this ingenious argument, which I shall sketch out in a little more detail below, I have to confess it leaves me at the end with some questions about its philosophical basis.

Saito opens her discussion by identifying three contemporary, widely recognized kinds of anxiety that are undermining our confidence in our democracies. The initial set concerns social inclusion. As our societies become increasingly diverse, more and more heterogeneous groups ask to be included in decision-making and leadership. This can cause established groups to fear the loss of their dominance and to react contentiously, threatening social coherence and peace. As I write this, daily demonstrations in New York City and elsewhere in the US for racial justice, and the exploitation of these protests by a divisive

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presidency attempting to extend its authority, are inflaming antagonism among various groups. It has rarely been more brutally clear to Americans that one possible way a democracy can die is at the hands of runaway factionalism.

The second set of anxieties to which Saito recalls us concerns our management and tolerance of risk. As new technologies affect the world in more complicated and interconnected ways, our sense of being uncontrollaby exposed to danger rises. We become more inclined to seek safety above anything else, even as we worry that our efforts will be futile or even counterproductive. In her text, she refers to the demoralizing impact of the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster. But she is of course also prophecizing how the current Covid-19 pandemic is casting a shadow over, and altering, our daily work, leisure, and family routines.

As her last set of anxieties, Saito turns to those concerned with the lack of meaning in our lives. She roots this existential discouragement less in individual pathology and more in something that is evidently missing in the regeneration of our societies. In particular, pursuing the criticism of William Deresiewicz, she considers how higher education today tends to breed "excellent sheep." As colleges and universities focus ever more narrowly on the promotion of individual success measured in monetary terms, less and less attention is paid to the existential meaning of such success, that is to say, whether and how it may truly help us understand and affirm our mortal lives. Consequently, both the striving for, and the achieving of, material prosperity may feel hollow. One wonders whether this emptiness will grow as schools shift further to online, machine-based teaching during this pandemic period and perhaps beyond.

Combined, these anxieties sap our will to political, constructive action. They make us more prone to mistrust others, or more dubious about the effectiveness and the point of cooperating with them. In the grip of such negative emotions, it can seem not unreasonable for each of us to withdraw from society and reduce our aspirations to those of self-promotion and self-protection. Faced with this crisis, then, Saito urges us to find a countervailing source of positive emotions celebrating democracy. She calls for an enhanced project of education that would move us to renew our commitment to work more closely with others on equal terms, creating a society that would be still better.

For insight into how such a political education of the emotions might work, Saito turns to American philosophy. As she understands it, this philosophy serves above all "life," and the possibility of living it ever more fulfillingly. Her interpretation reaches back to the core, mythic tropes of Emerson's and Henry David Thoreau's transcendentalism, oriented to the radiance of the New World. Perhaps we can get a grip on our social anxieties by renewing our experience of the promise of the present.

With this move, however, Saito risks turning away from a reservation that is likely to occur to many: How can we be confident that this philosophy, rather than being the basis for a solution, is not part of the problem? After all, it may be no accident that the will to democracy has flagged during a historical period of American hegemony. Perhaps the promise of the present was bound to decline into advertisements for consumerism, In order to overcome our anxieties, we might need rather to break the spell of this nation's way of thinking.

Saito responds to the worry that American philosophy may be complicit in our ills by further specifying what she finds to be its enduring potential. She acknowledges that as transcendentalism developed into the pragmatist thinking of Dewey and William James, as a philosophy for living grew into philosophical work that focuses on solving problems that really matter, our conception of these problems degraded. We increasingly took "mattering" to mean making a difference to the bottom line. With this in mind, then, she focuses

her retrieval of this philosophy on the way that, beyond directing us to concrete problem-solving, it expresses an emotional stance toward our social life as a whole that is inspiring. Such inspiration alone will not change a problematic situation. But it can move us to keep trying, no matter the repeated setbacks and new challenges.

So what, exactly, is inspiring about this philosophy? How does this inspiration specifically bear on our anxieties about social inclusion, risk management, and existential meaning? What kind of action does it motivate? Answers to these questions, Saito explains, converge on the way this philosophy promotes the activity of translation.

As we familiarly conceive of it, translation is the work of taking things articulated in one language and adequately rearticulating them in another. If we pursue this activity very far, however, we will eventually encounter words and sentences in someone's language that resist translation. We become aware of something that cannot be shared with members of a different speech community. The discovery of such things can spur doubt that members of these separate communities can ever truly understand each other. Consequently, people on both sides of the divide may also become skeptical that they can work with each other, trust each other, feel safe with each other, or even have anything meaningful to say to each other. Our encounters with what resists translation, then, can exacerbate the very social anxieties that Saito is trying to address.

This key insight broaches the possibility of treating the anxieties homeopathically. Saito develops it by deepening, radically, our usual conception of the activity of translation. It is to accomplish this that she draws on the legacy of American philosophy. In particular, she takes up Cavell's antifoundationalist moral perfectionism which pursues the transcendentalist and pragmatist call to enhance the quality of our lives. Following Cavell, Saito suggests that our aim should not be to eliminate our anxieties about democracy, but to find a way of living with them democratically.

She stresses that encounters with linguistic behavior that resists standard translation may be seized on by the different language speakers as fortuitous chances to develop and broaden their languages. In other words, instead of feeling frustrated that I cannot understand the other or make myself understood by him or her, for instance, I could welcome the opportunity this person opens up for me to elaborate my home language, examining whether there are not clearer and more nuanced ways of making my experience intelligible. Moreover, as I and others work on our languages in this fashion, in conversation, we turn into different people. As the meaning of our experiences changes, the experiences themselves change, and so do the people who have them. Each understands something new about themselves, about how they may live their lives. And this happens because each attunes themselves newly to others in how their experiences are worded.

As an approach to such a process of bi-directional translation, Saito endorses Cavell's version of ordinary-language philosophy. Cavell constantly asks us to consider what we would say if we were in such-and-such a situation. Yet rather than seeing this question as a rationale to undertake some kind of detached, observational study to determine the right answer, he affirms both that each of us already has *our own* answer, and that we have to test this *provisional* answer by asking others to confirm it. Put another way, he finds in the question of how to cast personal experience into fitting words the very root of our engagement with others, the call to conversation. Accordingly, I am invited to respond to this question by volunteering something that takes the form, "this is what I think we would say," and then I have to wait and see if others will endorse my speaking for them. How I make sense, even if only in a soliloquy to myself, of a particuar experience, then, depends on how confident I am that this sense is shared. With regard to some experiences, I am bound to run up against the limits of my confidence; conversely, however, the attempt to

elucidate these limits may provide me and my interlocutors with an opportunity to extend them. Indeed, in this very fashion, Saito philosophically "translates" our ordinary conception of translation, with its focus on the bridging of different languages, into one that emphasizes how experience gains meaning by involving the experiencer with others. "As the experience of rewording the world, in the little rebirths this continually effects, and hence in its renewal of interest in the world, translation *is* transformation."[1] We summon each other together into the New World.

Thus the reason translation is central to American philosophy, and to what it has to offer our democratic life today, Saito claims, is that it is an activity in which we encounter, acknowledge, and struggle with our deepest doubts that our lives are understandable, to ourselves as well as to others. These doubts are the basis for the above social anxieties, or, put a bit more precisely, these anxieties largely come down to the realization that there is no sure foundation for our social life. This is what she means when she calls this philosophical conception of translation, "antifoundationalist." Now without at all pretending that this doubt can be completely overcome, she nevertheless insists that we may form or educate each other to *make* ourselves at least partially understandable. In this fashion, we find words with others, and others with words, that can serve as a temporary, but for the moment sufficient, support for cooperative living, living with doubt. This is what Cavell means when he declares that "finding is founding." It is also why translation inspires hope for democracy, the hope that by striving to make ourselves ever more understood, rather than forcing others to echo our current self-understandings, we each become better people, better conversational partners. We together acknowledge and affirm that we can still perfect ourselves morally. As Saito points out, "Cavell's sense of [philosophy as translation]… does not, unlike Dewey's pragmatism, avoid 'the obscurities and privacies of an inner life' but asks us to go through such obscurities. Our judgment is tested in a recurrent unsettlement of our standpoint with the sense of anxiety and fear."[2] From this perspective, the social anxieties that Saito registered at the outset may be actually providential for the democracy we are translating into being.

This outline of Saito's argument glosses over not only some of her more intricate turns of thought but also her many perceptive points about the nature and history of American philosophy. She engages critically yet sympathetically with a much wider range of thinkers than I have indicated. Nonetheless, I hope that my sketch draws out why her book should be of interest to scholars of American transcendentalism and pragmatism, critics and elaborators of Cavell's antifoundationalist moral perfectionism, and, perhaps most pressingly, educators who are trying to address the current threats to our democracies. Her stress on the educative and formative dimension of the activity of translation, and the way it may inspire democratic life, is impressively original. I find it persuasive and exciting. The reservations I have about her reasoning boil down simply to a desire on my part for its further elaboration. In this spirit, then, I shall end this review by sharing a couple of questions that genuinely puzzle me. Perhaps she may find them useful as she pursues her project.

The first concerns Saito's decision to call the work that she is responding to, elaborating, and advocating for, "American." Obviously, this designation is not false, especially if we are looking at the thinking geographically and historically. But it is not clear to me why we would want to view it in those non-philosophical terms; I worry that they risk

[1] Naoko Saito, *American Philosophy in Translation* (London: Rowan and Littlefield International, 2019), 11.

[2] Ibid., 113.

distracting us from its philosophical content, if not misleading us about it. We could get pulled into unproductive quarrels about whether John Rawls, for example, of whom Saito is consistently critical, is authentically American. Now I do realize that many of the figures to whom Saito is positively drawn, particularly Emerson, Dewey, and Cavell, explicitly address the idea of America. On occasion, they understand themselves to be philosophizing about what this idea fully means. I wonder, though, whether following them in this is actually useful for Saito's endeavor, especially if she wants to encourage non-Americans to translate this philosophy into their native thinking, and vice versa. Why specify that a particular community identity, and by implication not others, is at the center of, or at stake in, the translational encounters one is trying to invite? Could not the book's title be just as well, *Japanese Philosophy in Translation*? Indeed, would anything be lost if it were simply, *Philosophy in Translation*?

This question about what is to be gained by positioning the call to democratically educative translation with respect to a particular people leads me to a second one about its philosophical basis. I am not sure how compatible this call is with a discipline that is so essentially dialectical. I worry that encouraging ourselves and others to engage in bi-directional translation sits in uneasy tension with the sense that the invitation is based on "antifoundationalism," or, for that matter, on anti-anythingism. Imagine sitting down with a "foundationalist" and assuring her that you want to understand more fully some of her favored terms like "necessity," "the absolute," or "faith," but that you are committed to doing so within a framework that is opposed to such terms. It seems to me that either the receptivity to translation or the drive to dialectical definition and polemics would have to give way. What is puzzling is how we may harmonize the other-sympathizing, self-critical work of translation, on the one hand, with the assertiveness and defensiveness of philosophical argument, on the other.

Naoko Saito has offered us a timely and insightful introduction to the revitalizing power of translation for our democracies. I look forward to the conversation that she will inspire.