

Eisuke Wakamatsu. *Toshihiko Izutsu and the Philosophy of WORD: In Search of the Spiritual Orient*. Translated by Jean Connell Hoff. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. xi + 118 pp.

Eisuke Wakamatsu's intellectual biography of Toshihiko Izutsu (1914-1993) is the only resource of its kind available concerning the late Japanese scholar. This alone ought to make this work indispensable for anyone interested in Izutsu's life and thought. It also contains a useful chronology, as well as a complete bibliography of Izutsu's works. Wakamatsu's background in literary criticism can be felt throughout the book. The work is a dance between philosophy and poetry, and this is exactly what Wakamatsu wishes to convey about Izutsu as well (p. xvi). The breadth of Wakamatsu's research is impressive; he uses archival material and looks extensively into the resources Izutsu read and worked with. The result is a complex web of ideas and connections that are bound together "synchronically." What does the Muslim mystic Ibn 'Arabi have in common with Lao-tzu? And what do they both have to do with Izutsu? Wakamatsu carefully crafts a narrative that prepares us to confront this and similar questions that Izutsu had.

Wakamatsu situates Izutsu's intellectual biography between structuralism and the worldview of the existential phenomenologist of religion, but he also contextualizes it in the framework of the Japanese reception of Western philosophy and literature, as well as in the centrality of language in understanding other cultural and religious structures. The book can be divided into three main parts: the first part (chapters 1-5), traces the sources that influenced and contributed to the formation of Izutsu's thought, and follows him until he leaves Japan in 1964. Wakamatsu identifies four main sources for this period, namely Greek philosophy, Islam, Russian literature, and Catholic and French literature. While Buddhism is present to Izutsu since childhood, it does not become a prominent interest of his until later in life. In all these topics, the themes of prophecy and poetry – the saint and the poet – make a constant appearance. Wakamatsu insists that poetry, mysticism, and shamanism are the building blocks for Izutsu's understanding of religious phenomena. Here Socrates, Plato, Ibn Hallaj, Paul Valéry, Dostoevsky as well as Louis Massignon are some of the thinkers who provide context and shape to Izutsu's theories. It is also at this early stage that Izutsu writes a biography of the Prophet Muhammad and publishes the first Arabic to Japanese translation of the Qur'an. Wakamatsu

publishes the first Arabic to Japanese translation of the Qur'an. Wakamatsu points out that both are imbued with Izutsu's own Japanese understanding of prophecy and the transcendent. This reflects Izutsu's idea of scholarship, an idea which holds that many original thinkers (including Derrida, Foucault and Barth) utilize "creative 'misunderstandings'" (p. 160). In other words, a purely objective study is near impossible. Izutsu saw himself as an existentialist thinker; accordingly, he would only write about those things he could personally attest to (p. xvi; 160).

The second part (chapters 6-8) delves into the fruit of this development by looking at Izutsu's work overseas, first at McGill University's Institute of Islamic Studies in Montreal, then at its Tehran Branch in Iran, and finally at the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy. Izutsu's first non-Japanese work was *Language and Magic*. Underlying all of Izutsu's thought is a deep concern for language and linguistics. Despite being regularly identified as a scholar of Islam, Wakamatsu insists that Izutsu's speciality in Islam was simply one of his many talents. It was not in and of itself an end for Izutsu, but rather provided him with the most promising angle to reflect upon and develop a theory of language (see Chapter Seven). Language and linguistics form the starting point of Izutsu's reflections – all cultural and religious experiences find their root in language. Wakamatsu discusses Izutsu's linguistic theory and its relation to several thinkers including Kitaro Nishida and his Kyoto School, Johann Leo Weisgerber, Edward Sapir, and Benjamin Whorf. Finally, Wakamatsu observes the role of the Eranos conferences in Izutsu's works on Zen Buddhism and Oriental thought, while Henry Corbin's idea of a "dialogue dans la métahistoire" provides backing for a theory of "metalanguage" (p. 205; 226).

The third part (chapters 9-10) turns to the works produced after Izutsu's return to Japan in 1979. Wakamatsu seeks to narrate an intellectual biography that does not fully proceed in chronological order, but rather in an order of priority – he weighs the importance of the various sources of Izutsu's thought in the first part, ties them together in the second, and presents their culmination in the third. Wakamatsu's narrative ultimately prepares us for what he considers to be Izutsu's lifelong quest: the "synchronic structuralization" of Oriental philosophy, a theory or method of carrying out inter-religious (and also inter-disciplinary) dialogue. Wakamatsu clarifies that "Oriental" has little of the connotations it holds today. For Izutsu, the "Orient" is not a geo-temporal space, but rather an almost ontological

category that is trans-historical. It is also in this part that Wakamatsu brings out the salient features of Izutsu's final work, *Consciousness and Essence*, revealing his philosophical acumen. Perhaps one of the most enduring influences on Izutsu in this regard is that of Jean-Paul Sartre. Wakamatsu recounts the importance of Sartre's notion of the self, existence and "nausea" (pp. 265-268; 270-271), which, when paired with Derrida's notion of *déconstruction* – "the breakdown of language in the phenomenal world" – provides the theoretical basis of Izutsu's project (pp. 306-308). However, it is only after it converses with Buddhism and Islam, in particular, that Izutsu's philosophy takes its full form. It is not merely a methodology, but a metaphysical treatment of language and its limits in human consciousness.

Wakamatsu provides a compelling intellectual biography and repeatedly challenges the common assumption that Izutsu's esteem rests on his works on Islam. Izutsu repeatedly identified himself as a philosopher of language and Wakamatsu provides the evidence necessary to shift the reader's perspective in that direction. His case is compelling, and he succeeds in bringing out Izutsu's theoretical and methodological commitments to wider developments in linguistics and structuralism. Rather than providing a simpler narrative and dealing with the various elements of Izutsu's thought disparately, Wakamatsu goes out of his way to provide a cohesive narrative that substantiates his thesis. This certainly has the advantage of a synthesis, but the facts he presents are much too intertwined with his own commitments. He also inevitably excludes certain elements, for instance, the thorny and elusive subject of Izutsu's political views and perhaps connections – however oblique – to Japanese military programs and World War II. In addition, Wakamatsu has a tendency for repetition and poetic hyperboles which may be appealing in a literary context rather than an academic one. Be that as it may, Wakamatsu's work is a rich, detailed account of Izutsu's intellectual journey, and Jean Hoff's clear and accessible translation provides an abundance of bibliographic resources for the interested student.

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