

Hitoshi Imamura’s Concept of the Human as a Meaning-Ascriber: A Lesson to the “Post-Truth” World

Naruhiko Mikado¹

¹Osaka University, Japan

*Correspondence: naruhiko.mikado.19921027@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This research note has two objectives. One is to concisely explain a theoretical discourse which the Japanese philosopher Hitoshi Imamura propounds in the first part of his article titled “Studying Economy: Make the Drive for Meaning our Primum Mobile”. The other is, by expanding Imamura’s ideas, to derive insights beneficial to the contemporary era. To achieve them, the discussion employs explicative reading as its method and develops as follows. After an introduction mentioning a previous study on Imamura’s thought, the first section dissects Imamura’s line of reasoning and demonstrates that Imamura essentially advances the following thesis: A human is a being that is unable to be content with the world as it is and inevitably and constantly looks for a (concealed) meaning. The second section explicates Imamura’s observations which relate to the proposition and whose potentialities Imamura does not fully exploit. Thereupon, it concludes that, by acknowledging that each individual lives in a unique network of meanings but that the meanings are correctable, we can amend the present world some have qualified as “post-truth”.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Published June 6th 2023



KEYWORDS

Hitoshi Imamura; Humanities; Japanese theory; Philosophy; Post-truth.

ARTICLE LICENCE

© 2023 Universitas Hasanuddin
Under the license CC BY-SA
4.0



1. Introduction

The Japanese philosopher Hitoshi Imamura (1942-2007) would not be a familiar name except in the countries of the Far East. That is mainly because he, being ever active as an educator, rarely made a sojourn in a foreign country that was long enough for him to spread his celebrity worldwide (Shaoyang, 2013; Rhodes, 2019; Rahman et al., 2021). Yet, it goes without saying that how internationally famous a philosopher is should not be reckoned as a reliable criterion for judging whether the philosopher’s work is valuable or not (Ohji, 2015; Rahman, 2018). One can easily realize the standard’s undependability by bethinking oneself of the widely known fact that even Friedrich Schelling and Søren Kierkegaard, whom nearly all scholars would reckon as admirable philosophers, were in obscurity in their lifetime. Imamura is doubtless a philosopher who, albeit having been anonymous in global terms, deserves much more recognition for his achievements, which include, aside from the articles whose subject is identical to that of the essay investigated in this research note, monographs that elucidate Louis Althusser’s philosophy and rigorous and comprehensive studies on modernity (Coleman, 2019; Rahman, 2019).

As anyone who has read the above account can guess with ease, there have been few studies on Imamura that those who are not conversant with the Japanese language can refer to. Meanwhile, those who have high proficiency in Japanese will, after rummaging through libraries and web archives, discover two books and some papers thematizing Imamura. Nevertheless, in those pieces, they will find no reference to “Studying Economy: Make the Drive for Meaning our Primum Mobile”, i.e. the text into which this research note investigates, though a media article which gives an explanation of Imamura’s notion that humanity is, seen from a perspective informed by Althusser, “homo ideologicus” seems to have taken it into account (Mikado, 2022). At any rate, we may safely infer that no serious study on the essay has been issued heretofore.

Hoping to help Imamura to win the notice due to him, in this research note, I aim to carry out two objectives. The first is to concisely explain the argumentation that Imamura propounds in the abovementioned text. The second is, expounding on Imamura’s ideas, to derive insights beneficial to the contemporary era. The discussion subsequent to this introduction goes as follows. The next section dissects Imamura’s line of reasoning and demonstrates that Imamura essentially advances two theses. One is that a human is a being that is unable to be content with the world as it is and inevitably and constantly looks for a (concealed) meaning. The other is that any of those things that may appear to be material matters—work, economy, and exchange—cannot be sufficiently comprehensible unless one takes meanings

that humans ascribe to them into consideration. The third section explicates Imamura's observations which mainly relate to the former proposition and whose potentialities Imamura does not fully exploit. Thereupon, it concludes that, by acknowledging that each individual lives in a unique network of meanings but that the meanings are correctable, we can amend the present world which some have qualified as "post-truth."

2. Methodology

The method used in this essay is explication. Simply, this method of reading a text goes beyond a literal understanding of the text and delves into such non-literal elements as its nuances, symbolism, figurative devices, and thematic elements. Therefore, it not only involves a careful examination of the text's content, structure, language, context, and background but also anatomizes its underlying ideas and values. In short, explication engages with a text on multiple levels. Of course, the entire discussion that follows does not put on exactly equal emphasis on all the above-mentioned elements. Nevertheless, I make it clear that every argument presented in this text is based on the method of explication as that which is defined above.

3. Result and Discussion

A. Humans as Animals Bound to Search for Meanings

Imamura's article "Studying Economy: Make the Drive for Meaning our *Primum Mobile*" first appeared in the morning edition of the *Nikkei Shimbun* which was published on the 31st of March in 1998. Although it contains no numbered headings, one can consider it to be consisting of two distinct parts. The first part, which will be dissected, is, shorter as it is than the second, of the definitely superior moment in that it constitutes the theoretical substratum on which all the arguments in the text base themselves.

After an introductory paragraph, Imamura poses a radical question: "Why, in the first place, is there something called economy?" Thereto he furnishes an ostensibly unsophisticated answer: "That is because human beings have their body." Naturally, he fleshes out the plain answer, stating that "if human beings were bodiless entities like angels, they, having no necessity to nurture their body, would not have to produce things through work or to exchange and distribute the productions," that "if the body of human beings were, as defined by Descartes, merely an object which has its 'extension,' they, having no necessity to feed an object, would not need to have economy in which they work and distribute," and that "because one is neither an angel nor a mere object and is fated to have a living body as an animal, one is also fated to develop economy."

One would not have much difficulty in encapsulating the foregoing argument, which roughly submits that it originates from our being embodied beings whose organization requires being regularly maintained that we are certain to have a system in which we work, produce, exchange, and distribute. There might be a few who put down this case as a matter which is too evident to be expressed; still, anyone who takes heed of the article's title and can correctly surmise the context in which it should be located would not be so remiss as to suppose in that way. What is really intended is to insinuatingly criticize economics' tendency to neglect many of the realities of human beings and to reduce them to rational calculators.

This, though, does not mark the end of the initial part. Actually, the most perspicacious insight that Imamura sets forward is found in the ensuing sentences in which he variously differentiates the human body from that of an animal. He notes that "an animal, albeit having a living body as a human, exists, in the cycles of natural history, like water in waters," and that "while an animal lives by feeding on something, its way of living . . . needs neither a system of means and ends (instrumental conduct) nor a symbolic system (a paraphernalia for construing meanings of the world) with which to represent one thing with another." He, perhaps conscious of the complexity of these expressions, elaborate their gist in a superb paraphrase: "In short, an animal can ensconce itself in and, as it were, be harmonious with nature; or, in an animal, eating and living do not split up. . . . Human beings' fate is that they are incapable of feeling alive unless they, in addition to feeding their body, ponder about the meanings of feeding."

Few would gainsay the validity of a train of deductions made in the above-quoted passages, which one can condense into this thesis: A human is a being that, albeit living corporeally in the world, is unable to be content with the world and things as they are and inevitably and constantly looks for (concealed) meanings which should be beneath the surface. To describe the thesis in more digestible words, a human is an animal peculiarly ordained to ceaselessly read everything. Some of those who are familiar with philosophy will here descry an exquisite synthesis of the ideas of Heidegger (2008), Merleau-Ponty (2014), and Althusser (2020), though another article is needed to give an adequate exposition thereof.

What Imamura does in the second part is, basically, to apply the idea to inquiring into work, economy, and exchange. Those examinations contain a fair number of points which those who have studied the economic phenomena will esteem to be interesting. But, because scrutinizing them does not fall within the scope of this research note, we, leaving the task to another opportunity shall move on to the third section.

B. Modern Human Condition and Semantic Instability

The general drift of Imamura's concept of the human being which I have just recapitulated into a proposition will strike one as penetrating. Actually, it is totally possible for one to elicit some practical lessons directly therefrom. Still, in the text Imamura, albeit in a desultory fashion, drops a few more relevant remarks. As we can fathom the profundity of Imamura's notion more distinctly by contemplating them, we shall check out them.

One is that in modern times "meanings, having been detached from mechanisms constructed by communities, have ducked into the interior of an individual; it has become a 'private business' to satisfy one's demand for meanings." Before inspecting this, it would be more apt to cite the other, which is that "since meanings are ceaselessly undergoing historical fluctuations, one has to incessantly adjust configurations of meanings."

Needless to say, the first is sociologically sound and the second is linguistically provable; however, that they are valid is less significant than their potential to enrich the import of Imamura's diagnosis of what a human is. In other words, when we graft the remarks, one of which clarifies the specific circumstances defining modern humans while the other points to a property of meanings and their totality, to the thesis concocted in the preceding section, we will acquire a more comprehensive appreciation of Imamura's concept of the human being.

One can reformulate and communicate it with three propositions. First, a human is an incarnated entity that cannot reconcile oneself to being with the perceptible ways the world and things are and always quests after hidden meanings. Second, a modern human has broader latitude and arbitrariness in ascribing meanings than that which had been allowed to premodern people. Third, both a meaning and a semantic matrix themselves are open to change.

4. Conclusion

To wrap up this research note, I would like to glean a practical lesson from the above speculations. Imamura's ideas that we have hitherto reviewed may come across to some as gloomy. Admittedly, one can view them as pinpointing an inexorable reason why the current world has become brimful of those communicative problems for which it is sometimes qualified as "post-truth." But once one realizes the rigid reality that, if one wants to solve a problem, one has to grasp both an overall picture of the problem and its details, one will also apprehend that Imamura's discourse is tremendously useful in coping with post-truth problems.

On the one hand, Imamura sternly presses us to acknowledge that each modern individual can be regarded as living, on account of a human's attribute and of a condition particular to modern times, in a unique network of meanings. Still, on the other hand, he, by indicating that both meanings and assemblages of meanings are constantly experiencing transfigurations and are thus, to borrow a word of Azuma (2022), "correctable", implies that there always remains a possibility that one can adjust one's meanings so as to enable communication with another with whom one has had difficulty in conversing.

We should recall the bewildering number of problems that have arisen (and will continue to arise) from human beings' failure to balance their meanings. We are never able to create a heaven where every individual's meanings can be accepted as they are. Yet, with the aid of Imamura's thought, we would be able to create a world where every individual is aware of there being a hope of, through mutual efforts to adjust meanings, agreeing on a tentative truth (meaning) with another.

References

- Imamura, H. (1998). Studying economy: Make the drive for meaning our primum mobile. *Nikkei Shimbun*, 31.
- Mikado, N. (2022). *Humanity as homo ideologicus: On hitoshi imamura's theory of general ideology*. Brownstone Institute. brownstone.org/articles/humanity-as-homo-ideologicus-on-hitoshi-imamuras-theory-of-general-ideology/
- Heidegger, M. (2008). *Being and time*. Harper Perennial Modern Thought.
- Merleau-Ponty M. (2014). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge.
- Althusser L. (2020). *On ideology*. Verso.

- Azuma, H. (2022). The philosophy of correctability: Or on a New Publicness. *Genron*, 12, 31-105.
- Coleman, L. (2019). The Obscene in the Everyday: The Pornographers. *Killers, Clients and Kindred Spirits: The Taboo Cinema of Shohei Imamura*, 139.
- Ohji, K. (2015). *Premières réceptions d'Althusser au Japon*. *La Pensée*, (2), 127-137.
- Rahman, F. (2018). The Constraints of Foreign Learners in Reading English Literary Works: A Case Study at Hasanuddin University. *Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 7(2), 01-12.
- Rahman, F. (2019). Save the world versus man-made disaster: A cultural perspective. In *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* (Vol. 235, No. 1, p. 012071). IOP Publishing.
- Rahman, F., Sutanto, T. E., & Fitriyati, N. (2021). Web Traffic Anomaly Detection using Stacked Long Short-Term Memory. *InPrime: Indonesian Journal of Pure and Applied Mathematics*, 3(2), 112-121.
- Rhodes, R. F. (2019). The Religious Philosophy of Kiyozawa Manshi. *The Dao Companion to Japanese Buddhist Philosophy*, 537-563.
- Shaoyang, L. (2013). Japanese Postmodern Philosophy's Turn to Historicity. *Journal of Japanese Philosophy*, 1(1), 111-135.