

**PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE IN THE JAPANESE  
EARTHQUAKE OF 2011. AN INTERVIEW WITH PROF.  
TETSUYA KONO**

***LA FILOSOFÍA APLICADA EN EL TERREMOTO JAPONÉS DE 2011. UNA  
ENTREVISTA CON EL PROF. TETSUYA KONO***

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*José Barrientos (JB): Could you explain your background on Philosophical Practice/Philosophy for Children?*

Tetsuya Kono (TK): My major is originally the philosophy of mind and phenomenology. I am now teaching philosophy and ethics in the department of education. I have practiced philosophy café and science café for adults and university students for several years. Because my university is a private university which has primary and secondary schools, I tried to practice philosophical dialogue in the classroom of the primary school in the same way as philosophy café with my undergraduate students. This practice also serves for the education of the undergraduate students in my department. Then, I came to know the theories of P4C as well as the academic associations such as ICPIC.

*JB: Can you explain the experience of the Earthquake in Japan?*

TK: The 9.0-magnitude undersea earthquake occurred on 11 March 2011 at 14:46 in the north-western Pacific Ocean of Tōhoku area. At that time, I was at Shinjyuku station, one of the biggest train stations in Tokyo. The quake was the biggest one I have ever experienced. But, I didn't think this quake was not so intense as to destroy the buildings in Tokyo. Actually, there was neither big destruction nor big fire in Tokyo. But, next day, I was really shocked to watch a TV report of the massive destruction by Tsunami whose waves reached up to almost 40 meters in height as it laid waste to the Pacific coastline of Japan's northern islands. The disaster resulted in the loss or missing of nearly 20,000 lives, and devastated entire towns along with the seashore. The tsunami also created over 300,000 refugees in the Tōhoku region; and still more than 240,000 people are forced live outside of their home town (September 2014).

However, the biggest problem is rather the accident of the Fukushima nuclear power plants. The tsunami disabled the cooling systems at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant and there was partial nuclear meltdowns or melt thorough in three units. Significant amounts of radioactive material have been released into ground and ocean waters so that the events at Fukushima Daiichi have been rated at Level 7, the worst level, on the International Nuclear Event Scale.

The experience of this Tohoku disaster brings to Japanese people deep and bitter self-reflections on the problems of their society and civilization. This crisis reveals the shortcomings and the problems within Japanese society. The preparations for the possibly biggest tsunami were not enough although the historical records have taught us that tsunami waves over 30 meters in height have struck the region several times in the past. Tokyo Electric Power Company servicing Japan's Kantō region which is responsible for the Fukushima accident was not able to take quick measures corresponding to the disaster, and was too slow and reluctant to reveal the complete truth about the actual damage and the possible danger. TEPCO had continued to promote the uses of nuclear energy while ignoring the opinions of those that had pointed out the danger of a nuclear plant built at the region where big earthquakes are frequent. The company's headquarters underestimated the possibility of the risk of earthquakes and tsunami, and did not take the prediction seriously.

Through this experience, Japanese people tend to be skeptical about the future of science and technology. They are also disappointed with the irresponsible attitudes of scientists and university intellectuals. TEPCO is a monopolistic and bureaucratic enterprise which has a collusive relationship with the political, administrative, and even academic worlds; it tends to neglect the critics and cautions thrown from the outside. Japanese people regard that this TEPCO's problem precisely reflects Japanese society's problem. Japanese government has not prepared a comprehensive crisis management system to be ready for this kind of emergency situation, and cannot make a recovery plan based on a coherent policy and philosophy. Japanese people realized that Japanese politics and government are not so democratic that they represent some elites' interests rather than the local people's will.

*JB: What where the main philosophical needs that appear?*

TK: Becoming skeptical about putting important things in the hands of a political, administrative, and scientific elites, Japanese people seem to want more autonomy of citizens. They also need a consistent policy and philosophy about how to cope with energy problem and how to reconstruct and revive the local

areas of Tohoku. They also want to think of what the future of science technology should be, what the relationship between human beings and the natural environment is, and in which direction our civilization should advance. All these questions are philosophical as well as ethical. I think this is why so many philosophy café and city forums are opened after the disaster.

*JB: What is the essence of the project and how do you developed it?*

TK: My colleagues and I have some different projects in Tohoku area. I am involved with two projects. One is philosophy café with Fukushima refugees at Iwaki city in Fukushima prefecture; another at Rikuzentakata city in Iwate prefecture. The 2011 earthquake and tsunami caused extensive damage to the city and about 10% of population (originally the city had 23,000 people) are lost by tsunami. Both projects are conducted in the framework of the support project for Tohoku area by My University, Rikkyo University. I am participating in the library support project. While my colleagues help to reestablish municipal and school libraries which were destroyed by tsunami, I practice philosophy café in library and plan to practice P4C in school libraries. Philosophy café in this project aims providing opportunities to talk about the problems and future of the local region. Philosophy café is neither clinical consultation nor political debate. The neutrality and a kind of abstractness of Philosophical dialogue make the participants feel free to talk about the themes. We don't need any definite consequences of the dialogues. But, the philosophical dialogues contribute to the local people to give opportunities to talk and think about the theme which is difficult to discuss in an ordinary daily life.

*JB: What was the profile of the people that attend to your sessions?*

TK: Very divers, I guess. I ordinary don't ask the profile of participants. I find out it only through the content of discussion.

*JB: Is there any difference on your activities because of working with Japanese instead of foreign people?*

TK: I don't have any experience to conduct philosophy café abroad by myself. About philosophy café for adults or university students, I don't find so much difference from the people in other countries. But, about philosophy for children in classroom, I sometimes face some difficulties have something to do with the characteristics of Japanese school culture. One is conformism. Children are often under extreme pressure of strong conformism requiring to "do it in the same way

as others” or to “be harmonious with others. Another is the strong gender bias. Girls over the age of about 11 years tend to be reluctant to express their opinion in front of many people.

*JB: What did you do at the sessions? What is the methodology you proposed?*

TK: Philo café for the people who have suffered from the disaster is neither to enjoy games of questioning, nor to exercise for critical thinking, nor to learn something from philosophical knowledge, but to provide opportunities to think of the real, profound, and serious problems for the individual, the family, and the society, and to let the participant discuss towards solutions (but not forcibly) by avoiding to fall into political debates. What I do in the session is to devote myself to being a mere facilitator or moderator. I ordinarily ask participant to propose the theme and the question of the café, then start to discuss to deepen the proposed theme. In the philosophy café in Tohoku areas, I never use either a text of philosophy or philosophical terminology. I also prohibit the participants from quoting from famous philosophers’ book and from using philosophical jargons. I ask the participant to first listen very well and carefully to other participants’ opinions, to slow down, and to take enough time to think and reflect on it. Silence by thinking is highly recommended. When someone talks of something, I ask other participants if they have any questions or comments, and proceed dialogue slowly.

*JB: What philosophers and skill do you think are the best for this work?*

TK: No classical philosophers are necessary. Best skill is to slow down the pace of discussion and wait (make the participants wait).

*JB: In what sense the work of the sessions is philosophical?*

TK: Because it arrives at questioning the fundamental premises or beliefs which are implicit and not questioned in our daily life or in our social customs and habits. And because we can deepen our thinking through dialogue with others.

*JB: What were the results of the sessions?*

TK: People want to discuss more and think more about the theme after the session.

*JB: Would you like to add anything more?*

TK: No, I wouldn't. Thank you very much.

