Longing to Make Sense of What Awaits Beyond

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Childhood in Japan

I was born in 1975 in Tokyo and grew up there. My father was an engineer, and my mother was an English teacher. I have an older brother who is two years my senior. Japan is a religiously and spiritually diverse country. Most Japanese people are nominally Buddhist or Shintoist, and they do not consider themselves to be particularly religious. Most of them would probably say that they have no interest in religion. Yet, spirituality is interwoven into the fabric of Japanese culture, shaping traditions, customs, and everyday life. Japanese sensibility is grounded in the pantheistic or polytheistic belief of Shinto, which holds that divinity is immanent in nature. This perspective fosters an openness to celebrating all religions, acknowledging the diversity of spiritual paths and their unique contributions. As a result, it is common in Japan to embrace multiple religious practices: visiting a Shinto shrine to pray for the New Year, attending events to celebrate Christmas, and ending the year by ringing a bell at a Buddhist temple to cleanse oneself of accumulated worldly desires.

I have a vivid memory of my maternal grandfather praying to both a small Shinto shrine and a Buddhist altar in his house every morning. This is a common practice in traditional Japanese households, representing the syncretism of Buddhism and Shinto. Meanwhile, my grandmother—his wife—was a Christian going to Catholic church. My parents sent me and my brother to a private Presbyterian junior high school and high school, where I read the Bible and attended a service every morning. Although I was not conscious of it at the time, looking back, I think I grew up in a religiously rich and diverse environment.

As a child, I was drawn to three main interests: science, drawing, and books. In Japan, it is quite common for children to keep insects as pets, particularly large, shiny beetles. I had a few of my own and found great joy in observing their behavior and how they lived. At the same time, I remember feeling a deep sense of unease when they died. It was as if I had caught a fleeting glimpse of the hidden, dark side of the world that we do not normally see.

In Western culture, insects are often perceived as creepy or even harmful, but in Japan, they attract a unique fascination and appreciation among people. Many superheroes and cartoon characters are inspired by insects, and creatures like cicadas, butterflies, and dragonflies are common motifs for traditional Japanese art symbolizing the beauty of distinct seasons. The fragility and short lives of insects are also tied to *wabi sabi*, the aesthetic awareness of the transience and impermanence of everything, including human life.

I enjoyed collecting fossils as well. I liked to hold them in my hands and imagined how they might have lived millions of years ago. It amazed me that the traces of animals that once roamed our planet are still here, linking me to a distant past. I was also fascinated by astronomy, and I enjoyed observing stars through my telescope. I frequently wondered whether life might exist on other planets or how long it would take to travel to distant galaxies. My interest in insects, fossils, and astronomy might have unconsciously prompted my philosophical interest in the spatiotemporal vastness of the universe and our small existence in it. I have always found it both remarkable and strange that the universe exists at all and that we, as tiny fragments of it, are here, in this moment.

Regarding drawing, there was a time when I wanted to be a graphic novelist. At around fifteen, I wrote a letter to a senior manga artist, and we became friends. He and his wife were incredibly welcoming, regularly inviting me to their home to share my manga work with them. During this time, I also attended an art school, where I received formal training in watercolor and oil painting. What I enjoyed most about drawing was the feeling that the characters I drew on paper seemed to come to life.

I also loved reading. My parents encouraged me to read as much as I could. They bought me toys only on special occasions, but they allowed me to buy books whenever I wanted. I enjoyed reading stories before bed, and when I became attached to a book, I would keep it beside my pillow, hoping to dream about its stories. After school, I would often lose myself in books in my room, only to look up and realize it had grown completely dark outside. I loved the feeling of being so absorbed in a book that I never wanted it to end, and I was amazed by how much we can learn from great minds who are no longer with us, by reading their works. This sentiment is captured in one of my favorite quotes by the 14th-century author Yoshida Kenkō: "It is a most wonderful comfort to sit alone beneath a lamp, a book spread before you, and commune with someone from the past whom you have never met" (McKinney, Yoshida, and Kamo 1330–2/1212; 2013, p. 27). Inspired by many authors, I wrote my own stories and even created magazines, filled with original tales and self-crafted articles.

Although this is a reflection in hindsight, I can now see that the core elements of my work as a philosopher of religion were already present in my childhood: religion and spirituality, an interest in nature and our place in it, and a love of reading and writing. As a teenager, I briefly considered studying science, especially physics, because it seemed to answer all important questions about reality. However, one day, I came across a book on the history of philosophy. I was particularly captivated by the ancient Greek concept of *archē*, the primal element or source that constitutes reality. Philosophy seemed to offer a means of exploring not only the structure of observable reality but also the nature of the unobservable, and I soon realized I wanted to study it further.

Student Life in Japan, the United States, and Australia

I attended a university in Tokyo that was affiliated with my Presbyterian high school. Although I was eager to study philosophy, the university did not have a philosophy program. As a result, I chose to pursue law, with the intention of specializing in jurisprudence, or the philosophy of law. At the university, there was an enigmatic jurisprudence professor named Hajime Yoshino. He had received a major grant from the Japanese funding body to develop a legal expert system, an artificial intelligence program designed to mimic how lawyers make inferences. Ahead of his time, Yoshino embarked on this project nearly 30 years before the release of ChatGPT. He was using Prolog, a programming language based on formal logic, on computers running UNIX and MS-DOS. I had expected the law professor to encourage me to study, well, law, but to my surprise, he recommended that I focus on logic and the philosophy of language instead, as that would better equip me to contribute to his project. I started to read books about these subjects, but I felt that I should study philosophy more properly. Since my brother was studying mathematics at the University of Pittsburgh, I naturally decided to apply to universities in the United States. I went to the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 2000. At this university, there was the Group for Logic and Formal Semantics, a team comprised of philosophy professors Patrick Grim and Gary Mar and students, working on computational modeling of philosophical arguments, puzzles, and paradoxes. There was also a philosopher of language and linguistics, Peter Ludlow. I learned

immensely from these teachers about how we can approach philosophical problems from a rigorous and formal perspective.

In Japanese culture, at least during my time as a student, schools did not place a strong emphasis on logical and analytical thinking. This may stem from traditional Japanese values, where clear-cut, "black-and-white" thinking is not typically regarded as commendable. Children are encouraged to focus on nurturing harmony and finding common ground rather than resolving disagreements by determining whose argument makes the most logical sense. Learning clear thinking and logic in the United States was a true revelation for me. It felt as though I had put on a pair of magical glasses, enabling me to see everything with much greater clarity.

In 1996, four years before I completed my undergraduate degree, David Chalmers published his groundbreaking book *The Conscious Mind*, which made a significant impact on the philosophy of mind. Inspired by his framing and exploration of the problem of consciousness, I chose to pursue graduate studies in the philosophy of mind after earning my BA. I applied to PhD programs at several universities in Australia because Australia was well-known for having produced some of the greatest philosophers of mind, such as U. T. Place, J. J. C. Smart, David Armstrong, Frank Jackson, and Chalmers himself. Although the philosophy of religion was not my primary area of interest at that time, I eventually wrote a doctoral dissertation at the Australian National University, under the supervision of Jackson, Daniel Stoljar, and Martin Davies, aimed at bridging debates in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of religion, focusing on the concept of omniscience in relation to phenomenal experiences. A revised version of this dissertation was later published as *God and Phenomenal Consciousness: A Novel Approach to Knowledge Arguments*. I completed my PhD in 2004.

As I explored profound questions in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of religion, I came to believe that there are countless ways to understand and describe the vast, complex world—whether through painting, music, scientific theories, literature, or philosophy. It was analytic philosophy that I chose as my path in the quest to understand the universe and humanity's place within it.

Academic Career in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom

After completing my PhD, I applied for countless jobs, fully aware that any given position in philosophy could attract hundreds of applicants. I was determined to make philosophy my career, no matter the obstacles. I was certain that I would regret it for the rest of my life if I did not succeed. I was not concerned about where I might end up living or how much I might earn. Perhaps I was naïve, but I believed—and still do—that no matter where you live, you can always make friends and build a fulfilling life, as long as you are able to pursue what truly matters to you. As expected, finding a job proved difficult. I remember feeling miserable in December, surrounded by the cheerful Christmas music in town, while I kept receiving rejection letters for my job applications.

Fortunately, I eventually received job offers from universities in several countries, including Australia, Canada, South Africa, and Turkey, and carefully considered each one. I was confident I would have enjoyed any of these opportunities, but I chose to accept postdoctoral research fellowships at the Australian National University and the University of Alberta, Canada, due to their strong research programs. I held both positions simultaneously, alternating between them every six months.

After completing a year and a half of postdoctoral research, I secured my first permanent position at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom in 2006. Shortly after my arrival, John Hick reached out to congratulate me on my appointment and expressed his delight that I

specialized in the philosophy of religion. Although Hick had retired by then, he taught at Birmingham for many years, and he lived near the university campus until his death in 2012. Even in his late 80s, he remained a sharp thinker. He hosted a group called Open End, where we met regularly at a member's house to discuss the philosophy of religion over coffee and wine. His work had a profound influence on me.

Hick is renowned for his defense of religious pluralism, which posits that all of the world's major religious traditions are culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality, which he terms the "Real." Formerly a conservative Christian, Hick embraced this view as he engaged with people from various religious and cultural backgrounds in Birmingham, a city known for its multicultural heritage. (In 2022, Birmingham became one of the first "super-diverse" cities in the United Kingdom, with more than 50 percent of its population from Black, Asian, or minority ethnic backgrounds.) Having spent 18 years living in Birmingham, I was deeply influenced by the city's broad cultural spectrum and Hick's philosophical work. His open-minded and harmonious view of religion resonated profoundly with the spiritual perspective I developed during my childhood in Japan as well as with my experiences living in five countries and working with people from diverse backgrounds. However, as a philosopher, I am not certain whether Hick's version of religious pluralism is ultimately tenable. First, it seems to me that both Hick and his critics place too much emphasis on determining which religion is the "true" one. While it makes sense to discuss whether a specific propositional belief is true or false, it seems less meaningful to debate whether entire religious systems are true or false. Religions are deeply intertwined with history, culture, and practice, making it problematic to treat them as merely a collection of propositional beliefs. Second, while Hick's claim that all major religions point to the same ultimate reality may initially seem respectful, it risks oversimplifying the richness and complexity inherent in the diversity of the religious landscape. What I find most remarkable are the unique ways in which distinct religions engage with human life and spirituality.

In 2019, I was appointed to the H. G. Wood Chair of the Philosophy of Religion, an endowed position previously held by such pioneers in the field as Hick, Ninian Smart, and Denys Turner, each of whom brought distinct and influential approaches to the philosophy of religion. This appointment motivated me to deepen my efforts to contribute to the globalization and diversification of the philosophy of religion, a field historically focused primarily on Judeo-Christian traditions. I was awarded substantial funding from the John Templeton Foundation to lead the Global Philosophy of Religion Project for three years. This initiative enabled me to collaborate with philosophers of religion across more than 24 countries, with a particular focus on underrepresented regions in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. The same year, I was appointed editor of *Religious Studies*, a philosophy of religion journal published by Cambridge University Press. As a new editor, I have aimed to strengthen the journal by actively encouraging submissions from scholars representing a variety of traditions and geographical regions. I believe it is crucial to promote diverse perspectives, particularly in the philosophy of religion, where we grapple with enduring and fundamental issues related to religious beliefs and practices. Each tradition offers valuable philosophical resources and ideas that can contribute to addressing these challenges. Although the Global Philosophy of Religion Project concluded in 2023, I continue to serve as editor and in various other leadership roles, which enable me to continue advancing global initiatives in the philosophy of religion.

Back in the United States: Continuing the Quest

In 2024, after 18 years of living and working in the United Kingdom, I relocated to the United States to assume the Kingfisher College Chair of the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics at the University of Oklahoma (OU). Before my job interview, I had never visited Oklahoma and knew little about the state. However, I was deeply impressed by the academic culture, which played a key role in my decision to accept the offer. The philosophy community at OU is characterized by warmth and inclusivity, fostering a supportive and collaborative environment that not only cultivates intellectual growth but also nurtures the careers of junior scholars and graduate students.

It was a particular honor to succeed Linda Zagzebski in this role as I deeply admire her work and share many of her research interests. On a personal level, returning to the United States carries both a sense of meaning and nostalgia because this is where my philosophical journey began 28 years ago. While the media frequently highlights the problems and divides in the United States, I have found people here to be exceptionally kind, respectful, and welcoming, making me feel genuinely at home. My wife and I do not have children, but our three adopted dogs and six hens keep our home lively and filled with joy.

As I approach 50, I find myself reflecting on my academic career. One of the central themes of my work in the philosophy of religion has been the existence and nature of the divine. My exploration of the concept of the divine begins with the Anselmian view, which defines God as "that than which no greater is possible." This definition captivated me as a teenager, and it remains compelling to this day. In my book *Maximal God: A New Defence of Perfect Being Theism* (2017), I develop a version of the modal ontological argument for the existence of a "maximal God" based on this concept. While I do not regard the ontological argument as definitive proof of God's existence, I maintain that it is as philosophically robust as many other arguments that are widely deemed successful. A second major focus of my work has been the problem of evil. In my recent book, *The Problem of Evil for Atheists* (2024), I argue that contrary to the common assumption, the problem of evil does not arise exclusively for theists; it also poses a challenge to pantheists, panentheists, axiarchists, and even atheists. Furthermore, I contend that theists are better equipped than others to address this challenge thanks to the supernaturalist resources available to them. I am drawn to these topics because they are foundational to the philosophy of religion, raising deep existential concerns as well as profound metaphysical puzzles.

People sometimes ask if I have ever had any religious experiences. Unfortunately, I have not. The closest experience I can recall is an unusual moment that occurred while I was reflecting on a philosophical argument. I was in my office, meeting with my colleague as she presented ideas that she hoped to explore in her paper. As I tried to organize her ideas into a coherent argument in my head, I had a striking vision: I could "see" a beautiful logical structure hovering above her head. It is difficult to describe, but it appeared almost shiny or sparkling, as if the formal structure of the argument was made visible. I have not had a similar experience since, but I often feel a deep aesthetic pleasure when developing philosophical ideas or reading philosophical works. While I would not consider this a religious or mystical experience, it remains significant to me, because it aligns with my view of philosophy as an art form—an effort to carve out clarity and order from the vast, complex realities of life.

The sense of wonder that I always keep in mind in exploring philosophical problems is presented in a Waka poem by the 12th-century poet Saigyō:

なにごとの おはしますかは 知らねども かたじけなさに 涙こぼるる

Who waits beyond?

I do not know—
Softly, tears bow low

Saigyō composed this poem during a visit to a Shinto shrine, despite being a follower of Buddhism. It reflects a religious sensibility that transcends any one tradition, which I share and hope to cherish. I consider myself a theist but, like Saigyō, I do not know definitively what ultimately exists. Yet, contemplating this mystery overwhelms me, both emotionally and intellectually, filling me with profound respect for the world's great religious and spiritual traditions. Each, in its own way, represents an attempt to approach what might lie beyond, and I deeply admire the human longing and effort to make sense of that which remains unobservable.

My life has been devoted to philosophy. While being a workaholic may not be widely celebrated these days, I genuinely love reading, writing, and teaching philosophy every day. Even after all these years, I still feel incredibly fortunate to make a living doing what I have always loved. As I grow older, I sometimes wonder how much longer I can continue this work and how many more books I might be able to write before time runs out. Writing a book is demanding and time consuming, so, if I am fortunate, I may only complete a few more. Yet, one thing is certain: I want to keep exploring the big questions about the world, human existence, and transcendence. These questions remain, for me, deeply puzzling, often frustrating, but endlessly fascinating.

References

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