

Obituary to Emeritus Professor Takahashi Takao from Kumamoto University

*This is an age when we have to live, or coexist,
with disasters, the 'age of co-disaster'; it
implies a new perspective on life and death,
nature, the world, and sciences.*

(Professor Takahashi, 2018)

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A series of disasters have occurred in the year 2020, from a global pandemic of the novel coronavirus to regional floods and landslides in many prefectures in Japan, especially in Kumamoto where the world had just lost a noble man. Professor Takahashi Takao (1948-2020) passed away after a lifetime of serving his beloved family, community, nation, the global society, and the academic world, especially the discipline of philosophy and ethics. However, his words, academic papers and books, original paintings, and the memories he left of a virtuous life filled with compassion and love continue to exert an impact on many people who knew him. In the face of an ongoing fight with an aggressive cancer, he bravely continued to host the annual international conferences in Kumamoto University where he repeatedly demonstrated his meticulous elaboration on ethical debate, exemplary patience in teaching, gracious and whole-hearted humanity, and compassionate kindness to everyone.

Takahashi graduated with a doctoral degree in philosophy from the University of Tokyo and started teaching as an assistant professor at Kumamoto University in 1984, was promoted to associate professor in 1993, and then professor in 1997. His specialty was applied ethics with an interest in

bioethics, environmental ethics, and ethics based on social research. He taught courses on ethics and bioethics, foundation of ethical theory, and cross-cultural communication. He served as the Dean of the HIGO Program at Kumamoto University from 2008 to 2010. He has left behind many research papers, both in Japanese and English, in bioethics, neuro-ethics, disaster ethics and philosophy, as well as books such as 'Taking Life and Death Seriously: Bioethics from Japan' (volume 8 of *Advances in Bioethics*, 2005) and 'Philosophy and Practice of Bioethics across and between Cultures' (Takahashi et al., 2019).

He received many research grants and awards including for 'Construction of disaster ethics based on consideration of various fields of applied ethics' (2014-2017), 'Research into bioethics in Asia based on three levels structure analysis' (2011-2013), 'Structuration of bioethical arguments in Japan based on reexamination of basic moral concepts' (2008-2010), as well as an honorary doctorate from Kyushu University. He hosted a series of 12 annual international bioethics conferences at Kumamoto University under the title of Kumamoto University Bioethics Roundtable (2007-2018) which brought together scholars from many countries around the world, and many regions in Japan. The usual venue for the conference was Kusunoki Hall in the north campus of Kumamoto University. This is where I first met him in 2009 and since then I would go there again, at the slightest hint of an invitation, once or twice every year, to meet him and attend another of his roundtables or classes where he spoke with the wisdom and gentleness of a true sage; he was such a lovely noble man.

For Professor Takahashi, philosophy and ethics were not just an academic specialty, a career, or an intellectual interest; it was about how he lived his life. He wrote: "*I consider the fundamentals of ethics as being inseparable from our daily lives. The focus*

should be placed on the roles that one holds within daily practices.” He wrote about the philosophical foundation of disaster ethics, and in his analysis, he examined the role of human virtue in both disaster preparation and response to disaster. Particularly after the magnitude 7 earthquake in Kumamoto in 2016 which caused more than 50 deaths and thousands of casualties, he devoted his academic research to the study of disaster ethics, including the concept of triage during disasters. He was a passionate defender of the rights of patients, the idea of human dignity, betterment of quality of life, applications of the principle of utility, the significance of the principle of self-determination, and the concept of care. And he followed all these with the strong sense of a talented artist. His acute senses and perception are reflected in his writings and artistic creations, for example where he wrote:

“I drew a big red carp rising slowly from inside an aquatic plant. To me, the carp represents the truth; it looks vague and then as you stare at it to see better, it disappears.”

This phrase is not only a beautiful piece of mystic poetry but also succeeds in softening the complexity of philosophical thought within the beauty of a painting of nature. It is hard to find such a genius philosophical observation integrated into a work of art, in the work of a contemporary ethicist. However, the most genius work he did, in my opinion, was to devise a research methodology that he called ‘the three levels structure analysis’ (Takahashi, 2011). Unfortunately, the English article that described this method was not thoroughly copy-edited and the significance of this work was not appreciated enough outside of Japan where he received a large grant to run a number of ethics studies by many researchers over three selected ethical issues in Asia: ‘end of life care’, ‘organ transplantation’ and ‘reproductive medicine’.

I was one of the many researchers who were invited to conduct the multicultural research project over three years. In the beginning, I felt unsure, and made a very cautious approach to the adoption of this method in the study of ethical issues; however, as I continued to implement the method over the research issues, it all started to make sense. Soon I realized this method could also be used to do research on sociocultural issues, and succeeded in publishing such a paper in a peer reviewed journal. Professor Takahashi humbly attributed this methodology to the works of C. S. Pierce and John Rawls, while it was him who meticulously extracted the fine prints of the method and explained how it could be used. He strongly believed in the use of the survey strategy in research, with questionnaires and interviews as methods for data collection to examine the attitudes and actual conditions of people. From there, he explained in detail how induction, deduction and abduction played a role in a structured way to reveal three levels in the organization of ethical systems.

Takahashi loved nature and enjoyed hiking in Aso, an area of extreme natural beauty at the heart of Kyushu island. He believed that the humankind as a higher species is capable of finding happiness through the natural links it shares with other species; that is how I reappreciated the concept of biophilia from the study of biology in college, while he grasped the foundation of bioethics and applied it to the philosophy of life, happiness and death. His interest in environmental ethics took him to the issues of environmental pollution, depletion of resources and energy usage, global warming, conservation of nature, protection of biodiversity, explosion of the world population, and the rights of animals and natural beings. That was his duty of care.

I have learned through the years about many of his students and how kind and thoughtful he was towards

them, including the one that I introduced to him after she graduated from college at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU). Professor Takahashi was a great speaker and a passionate motivator to students. My former student has now become a successful lecturer at a reputable Japanese university, and I am proud of her achievements after she joined the HIGO program at Kumamoto University following the advice and supervision of Professor Takahashi. May his spirit be at peace.

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