A View on the Origin of “Information”

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In the spring of 2007 I began to think about the “Origin of Information.” I began it by seeking the views of such people as Ze-A-Mi (Noh play writer) and Goethe, and ultimately sought the view of Newton. I would like to begin this article by reiterating that process and then discuss the extension of that process.

1 Ze-A-Mi

Ze-A-Mi classified human ecological states into five types, i.e., “god, man, woman, crazed, and demon,” and described these types in more than 200 Noh plays. He was a pioneer in human observation. I, Fujiwara, assume that aged persons are the richest ones with respect to the information, because they are the persons who own the piles of experiences, i.e., the information. Fujiwara has accordingly assumed that the aged persons can display the origin of information.

With the context of thinking the origin of information, he has sought what Ze-A-Mi has described in his Noh plays as the states of an aged woman of 100 years old. He chose Ono-no-komachi as the representative of the Japanese of intelligence, and described Ono-no-komachi in three different states, i.e., “Sotouba (grave-marker) Komachi,” “Oumu (parrot) Komachi,” and “Sekidera (Seki temple) Komachi.”

Of these three states, Ze-A-Mi made “Sekidera” state as the highest of all. The fact that this Noh play has continually been appreciated in Japan for more than seven hundred years means that not only Noh players but also the Noh audience, i.e., the entire society, have accepted that view. I suppose that the Japanese society has accepted “Sekidera” because it strikes the basis of “Japanese emotion.” Assuming so, I wish to pursue the reason for that.

Let me explain a bit further. “Sotouba Komachi” is an old woman of “rationality,” who won an argument with a monk who had reprimanded her for sitting on a tombstone. “Oumu (parrot) Komachi” is also an old woman of “lyrical expertise,” who, by changing one letter in a Waka (31-syllable poem) by an emperor, drastically altered the “taste of the poem.” Both of these women seemed to be admirable for women of old age. However, Ze-A-Mi did not suggest that. Instead, he inferred that “Sekidera Komachi” of “idleness,” who just sat and did nothing, was the old woman to be admired. The society followed Ze-A-Mi. Why so? That was my question of last year.

What I finally realized is that after all “the rationality of discretion” or “the
sensitivity of emotion” belongs to “the typical human.” Yet Ze-A-Mi decided that such a state of transcending typical human-ness is the true image of the desirable elderly person, and apparently the society acknowledged the same. I thought that this was so because the Japanese had the aptitude to recognize that thinking. That was my conclusion as of last year.

Certainly predecessors in Japan and China used to discuss “the world of nothing” or “the world of idle life.” Even in the martial art it was customary to respect the “victory-without-weapon” style. In other words, there used to exist such thing as “nothing” or “atmospheric force,” that was considered to possess a superior power over the actual world’s “things” and substantial “matters.” By coming to this conclusion, I thought I was able to understand, for the moment, the feelings of Ze-A-Mi. The truth is, however, I was not sure if I really understood that.

2 Goethe

If things in Japan were described as above, how about in other countries? When I looked around, I thought that perhaps Goethe, one of the world’s greatest figures in literature was dealing with the similar contrasts. I decided to throw this question to my high school classmate Hattanda, who has recently finished reading every work of Goethe as a part of his ambition to read the entire series of world literature.

Precisely I asked him, “Why do you think Goethe, in his late years, reminisced about his life and gave the title of “Poetry and Truth” to his work?” Hattanda and I along with several other classmates have been having animated discussion (like we used to do 50 years ago) at luncheon meetings held every other month. Hattanda considered my question seriously, and replied, “Goethe’s works were entirely based on his own experiences. The “truth” of “Poetry and Truth” is a “story of his experiences.” But what would be the “poetry?”

Thus, the gist of the discussion has become “poetry,” which was considered to be the synoptic core of Goethe’s whole life. Earlier it was “idleness” by Ze-A-Mi, and now it is “poetry” by Goethe. Again I am not so sure if I am making my point clear. The question is, “What is “poetry?”

3 “Poetry”: Tanka (31-syllable poem), Haiku (17-syllable poem), Senryuu (17-syllable satiric poem)

Initially I vaguely thought, “Poetry is grasping the essential human qualities, and expressing them.” Subsequently my close friend and poet, Mr. Ichiro Oota told me about the female poet Saito, who composed the following poem:

_I wonder if certain aged women can be lustrous;_  
_Like flowers that are appreciated both at the beginning and at the end_
Indeed, this poem skillfully describes the “ideal state of aged women.” With this thought, another “hint (allusion)” came upon me. Again another old high school classmate, Yoshio Tagaya, confided in me, “Right now I am reading Senryuus. They are terrific!” With the “poem” by Ms. Saito and “Senryuus,” I felt I am closing in on my target, as if my “elder theory” is about to be completed with the notion that “poets reign supreme.”

However, still my mind was not completely transparent. After all, the substance of “poetry” was not yet clarified. Goethe gave the title of “Poetry and Truth” to his biographic piece. Thus, he must have been cognizant of the existence of “poetry” as contrasted to “truth.” But he did not clearly indicate that. Why didn’t he? I think, Goethe must have recognized the existence of something apart from “facts.” How could he satisfactorily express this in the title of the work? Of course Goethe had been writing poems. Is that “something” represented by his previously written poems? I doubt that. Because, if so, it would be too simple.

I would like to think that Goethe poeti-cized what he understood as the existence of something similar to Ze-A-Mi’s “idleness” and Japanese’s “nothing” or “atmospheric force.” Did Goethe sufficiently understand 17-syllable Haikus and Senryuus to include them in the “something?” If he did, my problem is again “poetry.” That is why last year I was unable to extricate myself from the quagmire of “poetry.”

The beginning of so-called “poetry” was about the same time when “characters” were created. The beginning of the characters was known to be China’s “Shih Ching.” That was about 5,000 years ago, i.e., the beginning of civilization. Thus, “Shih Ching” was the oldest literal record of humankind. Therefore, our discussion topic, “What is poetry,” is moving away from discouraging talk of the end point of aging and is shifting to the genesis of civilization, i.e., the beginning of human’s “intellectual activities,” and the relationship between the fundamental intelligence and sensitivity of pre-civilization human beings.

I said to myself, “I should give up and ask for help from somebody.” I solicited the help of Mr. Yoshifumi Tomoda, my oceanologist and artist friend of many years. I chose my question to be as concrete as possible, and asked him what the “poetry” in Goethe’s “Poetry and Truth” is. Previously, Mr. Tomoda had taught me that Oriental art is “deletion” and Occidental art is “addi-tion.” Later this lesson became the guidelines for my endeavor in ceramic art. After thinking my question over for a hot summer month, Mr. Tomoda sent me an awaited reply. His reply happened to include the opinion of his daughter, a comparative literature major in the U.S.

Mr. Tomoda and his daughter pursued the question, “Who translated the English word ‘poetry’ to the Japanese ‘shi’?”, and they reasoned the answer to be Oogai Mori. I agreed with them in focusing on the word origin, and that their reasoning exactly
matched mine. In the first place, how did ‘poetry’ begin? It began with “Shih Ching,” which was also the beginning of letters and documentation. “Shih Ching” equals “poetry.” Some explanation may be necessary here.

4 Shih Ching

Like Japanese Manyoushuu, Chinese “Shih Ching” is thought to be the “voices” and “lyrics” born out of the daily lives of the Chinese. In other words, “Shih Ching” is the documentation of these voices and songs. So explains Mr. Mekada (in his translation of ‘The Beginning of Song: Shih Ching’ published by Heibonsha in 1982) and the Chinese author, Tsao How Ru (in his book titled ‘A Guide to Shih Ching’, translated into Japanese by Eiji Masuda and published by Nicchu Publication in 1988). However, neither of these authors is writing about the things I want to discuss here. Mr. Mekada’s objective was literal evaluation, and the Chinese explanation emphasized, perhaps because of the then national political situation, “respect for Shih Ching means respect for the people/public.”

5 Origin of Poetry: Voice and Poetry

Thanks to Mr. Tomoda, I was able to learn about the origin of “poetry.” According to Koujien (one of the authoritative Japanese dictionaries), “the origin of poetry” was, first of all, Shih Ching, China’s oldest collection of poems, the anthology by Confucius, the compilation of 311 poems from the Yin period (11th century BC) to the Spring and Autumn period of Zhou Dynasty. Secondly, the origin of “poetry” was Greek poems of Homeros (9th century BC) Iliad and Odyssey. The third origin was Japan’s Manyoushuu, the compilation of songs during the period of 150 years from Emperor Nintoku through Emperor Jun-nin (759 AD).

Mr. Tomoda says that the common point among all these classics, which are considered to be the origin of “poetry,” is voices, i.e., words. Prior to the birth of letters, “words were the media for the transmission of traditions.” As soon as letters were created, they became the media for records / documentations. “Shih Ching” was born in the revolutionary period during which information media were converted from voice to letter. The “poetry,” which is the center of this discussion, was a product of that period. Therefore, it is commonly said, “It makes one feel good when poems are recited aloud.” That is because we all have yearning for poetry due to nostalgia for “voice” culture. Hooray for Tomoda Theory’s lucidity!

6 Arias of Poems

Unexpectedly I received a correspondence from another old high school classmate, Wakou Maruyama, who agreed with my previous “Poetry Supreme” argument and lamented that the contemporaries have
forgotten the virtue of reading aloud. In the beginning of last year I had submitted my transcript on “Discussion of the Aged.” Upon receiving Maruyama’s letter this time, I remembered a similar experience roughly 20 years ago.

It was an evening of bright moon light in the mid-fall. I asked each of my coworkers to discuss about his or her unique “moon.” The discussion ranged from the images of the moon in English, French and German literature to the lunar orbital theory in physics. The presentation that impressed me most was the recitation of one of Su Tung Po’s poems by a Chinese female research scholar, who happened to be a member of my laboratory. I had a sensuous reaction to her voice resonating over sake cups. I truly felt that poems were to be voiced or sung to be heard, and not to be read silently.

To go further on this point, “poetry” strikes a nucleus straight-forward. “Shouts” and “cants” do the same. Those two use “voice” to express “core.” On the other hand, “poems” are written with “letters.” In addition, though extraneous, it is said that “hiragana” is derived from Chinese characters, while “katakana” is derived from “vocal notes.” The “hiragana” cultivated the world of poems for 1,000 years in Japan. The “katakana cants” thrive at fish and vegetable markets, but they have never produced anything that corresponds to the art of Tanka poetry. Today’s youths tend to rely on “cants,” as we look at how they are exchanging information. It is not certain whether or not this trend is creating a new era.

So much for side-tracking. At any rate, I realized that “poetry” is the manifestation of what’s in the inner part of a man’s or woman’s heart, and that “poetry” is the place of “sympathy” regardless of where it is, Japan, the Orient or the Occident. That’s acceptable and fine. At this point in my understanding, Isaac Newton emerged in my heart. What this means is, based on the end point, that “literature and science are one and the same.”

Now the argument is that “poetry” is the core medium for “human expression of feelings.” The medium can be “voice” or “letters.” That’s fine. However, we are talking about “the world of emotions.” In our world, we have “emotions” and “logics.” How about the world of “logics”? When I thought about this question, Sir Newton happened to be able to give an answer.

7 Newton’s “Point Mass”

Newton developed his “physics” based on the concept of “point mass.” By doing so, he was able to convert the substances of the world, i.e., “materials” into abstract forms. According to a Webster’s dictionary, a “material” is defined as that which has a spatial expanse. Newton hypothesized that there is “point mass” which is a “point” that carries the mass of a material, but no spatial expanse. Because of this creation of the concept of point mass, it became possible to
clarify movements of materials with mathematical equations.

However, lo and behold, I discovered something quite amazing. Goethe had already proclaimed this “point mass” quite coincidentally. As I mentioned before, Goethe wrote the locus of his life by authoring “Poetry and Truth.” Yes, “Poetry and Truth.” In it, “facts,” i.e., “the events that happened during his lifetime” are the “truth.” Apart from that, Goethe believed that there was something else, more substantial and core-like, in his life. This something he did not discuss openly, but instead he added the word “poetry” in his title to point out its existence. That is how I understood. I would like to push further.

8 Newton’s Point Mass and Goethe’s Density Center of Gravity

Isn’t Goethe’s concept of “poetry” same as the “point mass” of Newton’s dynamics? I believe it is. They are the same, conceptually. In the German language, the true meaning of “point mass” is hidden in the word, “poetry,” i.e., “Dichtung” of the word of the title of the Goethe’s work, “Dichtung und Wahrheit.”

Because “Dichtung” in German signifies density-mass, I think, it also refers to the meaning “whole” or “core.” Then it must be “point mass.” Thus, needless to say, Goethe was well aware that the word Dichtung signified the core of a matter, and Ogai Mori and German-Japanese dictionaries translated “Dichtung” into “poetry.”

Now, my roaming argument is “Newton and Goethe are united.” Hip, hip, hurrah. Newton says that “nature” is represented by the both sides of “point mass and mass;” Goethe says that “life” is a combination of “poetry and truth,” and Ze-A-Mi says that a “human being” consists of two facets of “motion” and “quiescence.”

I am not finished with this two-facet argument, if I may proceed with my frivolous discussion. I say that Newton’s two facets of mass-point and mass were unified by Einstein’s mass-energy equivalence theory. Then, Goethe’s “poetry and truth” could be similarly unified.

I do not know for sure but I thought I heard that the same thing was mentioned in Prajna-paramita-sutra. Someday I want to ask someone about this. One more thing, Newton and Goethe were good friends with each other for a long time. Both of them together had discovered the light’s 7-color component theory.

9 Conclusion: “Sekidera” by Yasuo Imai, Noh Master

My “View on the Aged” of 2007 began with the observation of Ze-A-Mi, which ended up with “Sekidera Komachi.” In September of that year, “Sekidera Komachi” was performed for the first time in these 100 years, by Noh Master Yasuo Imai of Houshouryuu School. Furthermore, on April 6, 2008, the day before yesterday, the same Master Imai played “Obasute.” I was told that this “Obasute” was also performed by
the Houshouryuu School for the first time in these 100 years. Sitting in one of the seats in the audience, my mind was filled with a kaleidoscope of Playwright Ze-A-Mi, Master Imai’s actions, and my own “View on the Aged.”

Plays that are performed once in 100 years are filled with histories. Each performance is a record and that is a tradition. This is a fact. In other words, what we observed in that day’s Noh performance was the “truth” of Goethe. Then where is “poetry”? I believe it was within the hands of octogenarian Master Imai.

On the stage, the Master, who was a lead player, was not moving. However, the lead player is the play’s director, as well as the conductor. The whole stage was composed of the chorus, the support players and the orchestra, all of which were in complete harmony with the lead player. This was the creation of the lead player, and the very thing that was created here was Goethe’s “poetry.” It was the “whole stage” created by the day’s lead player who was full of ingenuity and experience. At last, at this point, I saw a light. It took me two years to comprehend that Ze-A-Mi’s “nothing” as well as Goethe’s “poetry” are created by the will and work of “each individual.”

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In commemoration of 20th anniversary of JSIK: Japan Society of Information Knowledge, this article is dedicated to my old friends, Jacques-Emile Dubois and Michael W. Hill. The readers are encouraged to read their contributions to this journal in 2002.
