

Matter as a Point of Bifurcation of Platonism: Tanabe Hajime's Interpretation of Plato's Later Works and Neoplatonism

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(1) Introduction: Tanabe Hajime and Platonism

How Japanese philosophers approached ancient Greek philosophy, especially Plato—the source of Western philosophy—is a significant theme in Tanabe Hajime 田辺元 (1885-1962)¹, who is known together with Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870-1945). It is noteworthy that Tanabe not only refers to Plato as the model of his absolute dialectics (*Zettai benshōhō* 絶対弁証法), but also states, “My own position, in relation to classical philosophy, is of course the dialectic of Plato's later period” (THZ 7, 255). In general, Plato's major works comprise the famous *Apology of Socrates*, *Republic*—considered his main work, as well as *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*, with their florid descriptions. Thus, Tanabe's words appear unexpected. However, in terms of dialectics and its practice, as well as the connection between philosophy and religion, Tanabe's emphasis on Plato's later writings is perhaps, not only appropriate, but also an indication of the excellence of his attention.

It must be noted here that Tanabe focused not only on one philosopher, Plato, but also on Platonism, which originated from him. This leads to Tanabe's characteristic argument that crosses philosophy and religion while going beyond the interpretation of Plato's philosophy in a narrow sense. Therefore, it is insufficient to discuss Tanabe's interpretation of Plato in isolation. This can be confirmed by a letter to Karaki Junzō 唐木順三 (1904-1980) in January 1947.²

I wrote most of my manuscript after that. In that treatise, I focused mainly on criticism through Aristotle and Plotinus. I positively developed and interpreted my own position on Platonism and tried to fulfill its self-transcendent consequences in the gospel faith.³

Referenced in this letter is the third article, “Self-Transcendence in Platonism and Faith in Gospel (*Pratonizumu no jiko-chōetsu to fukuin shinkō* プラトニズムの自己超越と福音信仰, abbreviated as STPG),” in *Existence, Love, and Practice* (*Jitsuzon to ai to jissen*, 実存と愛と実践 1947), which is

¹ Tanabe's work referred to in this study is based on *Collected Works of Tanabe Hajime* (*Tanabe Hajime zenshū* 田辺元全集), Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1976 (3rd. pr.), abbreviated as THZ. When citing or referring to the work, the reference is indicated by the THZ volume number and page number. The quotations in parentheses () are the original text, and brackets [] indicate the author's additions.

² Similar remarks can be found in THZ 6, 454, etc.

³ *Tanabe Hajime and Karaki Junzō Reciprocal Letters* (*Tanabe Hajime Karaki Junzō ōfuku shokan* 田辺元・唐木順三往復書簡), Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 2004, pp. 42-43. The purpose of this letter was to advocate a second religious reformation by “achieving a fusion between spiritual renovation and social liberation” as a consequence of Tanabe's own Platonism, and to request Karaki to send him the manuscript paper.

the primary subject of this study. The first reason for Tanabe's emphasis on Platonism is that in Plato as a starting point, the dialectic⁴ that appears as the method of his philosophy is connected to Tanabe's absolute dialectic.

In addition, he finds negative occasions in Plato's dialogues, such as death and repentance (*zange* 懺悔), which are emphasized in the absolute dialectic, meaning that Plato, from Tanabe's point of view, shares some of the core ideas with himself.⁵ It should also be noted that Tanabe's interpretation on Platonism (which includes Plato, Neoplatonism, and the Christian mysticism of Eckhart and others influenced by Plato and Neoplatonism) is contained not merely within the realm of philosophy but also transcend the boundary and into the realm of religion as well. This can be verified from the fact that the letter mentions faith in the gospels, that is, Christianity, as a successor to Platonism. This is especially clear regarding Neoplatonism, which Tanabe labels as mysticism including Plotinus became an overreach of Plato⁶ and that this overreach was surpassed by Christianity including Eckhart.⁷ Looking retrospectively at Tanabe's writings, mystical method is mentioned as one of the methods of philosophy in Chapter 2 in his *Outline of Philosophy (Tetsugaku tsūron 哲学通論)*, published in 1933 (THZ 3, 439-440). Here, mysticism is "important as a form of philosophy that satisfies religious claims," and "the most representative philosophical system of mysticism in the history of Western philosophy is that of Plotinus (205-269), which emerged at the end of Greek philosophy" (THZ 3, 439-440), it is understood that Tanabe's focus on Platonism including Neoplatonism continued for a long time.⁸

The clue to understanding these themes in Tanabe is STPFG, which is mentioned in Tanabe's letter above. In this work, which was published as the third article in *Existence, Love, and Practice* in 1947, the

⁴ Plato's διαλεκτική is usually translated as "dialectic." Although it is not appropriate to use this translation as a fixed term for Plato, the term is used so frequently by Tanabe that it is used in this study with reservations.

⁵ This was discussed in STPFG, particularly the death of Socrates in *Phaedo* and the call of daemon (δαίμων), which also contains Tanabe's misreading of *Phaedo*. See, Doi Hiroto 土井裕人, "Tanabe Hajime's Interpretation of Plato: From the Discussion of Socrates to the Prospect of Neoplatonism 田辺元におけるプラトン解釈をめぐる—ソクラテスをめぐる議論から新プラトン主義を望見して—", *Studies in Philosophy*, No. 48, 2023, 51-65. This study continues to discuss points not examined in that study. Therefore, text from that paper may be used to the extent necessary.

⁶ Aristotle, on the contrary, is said to have failed to reach Plato (THZ 9, 398-399).

⁷ This point is discussed in my article below, including the possibility that Tanabe's initially critical attitude toward Plotinus changed favorably due to his attention to Eckhart. Doi Hiroto 土井裕人, "Acceptance of Neoplatonism and Its Changes in Tanabe Hajime: From Criticism of Nishida Kitarō to Christianized Plotinus, (田辺元における新プラトン主義受容の変化—西田批判からキリスト教化されたプロティノスへ—)" *Studia Neoplatonica*, forthcoming.

⁸ The view of Neoplatonism as a kind of fusion of religion and philosophy is common to Japanese philosophers such as Nishida and Hatano Seiichi 波多野精一 (1877-1950). See, Doi Hiroto 土井裕人, "The Beginning of the Acceptance of Neoplatonism in Japan 日本における新プラトン主義受容の創始期をめぐる—哲学と宗教の狭間で—", *Studies in Philosophy*, vol. 45, 2020, pp. 136-150.

following points can be found regarding Tanabe's interpretation of Plato, as discussed in my previous study.

- (1) From Socrates' death as depicted in *Phaedo* to Tanabe's absolute dialectic
- (2) Socrates in repentance and denial
- (3) "Matter"⁹ as a negative occasion
- (4) Existentialism and Platonism
- (5) From Socrates, an ordinary man who "practices death," to Zen Buddhism
- (6) Perfections of Platonism in Christianity

By examining Tanabe's discussion of matter as a negative occasion, this paper examines: how matter or the body in Plato is interpreted and incorporated into Tanabe's absolute dialectic; how this issue differentiates later Platonism (including Neoplatonism and Christianity); and how this relates to the crossover between philosophy and religion. Consequently, this study explored STPFG and related texts by Tanabe.¹⁰

Of course, the six issues listed above are not isolated from one another, and Tanabe makes his own speculations based on a consistent vision. However, because these aspects are somewhat complicated, we focused mainly on matter in this study.

(2) From the death of Socrates as depicted in *Phaedo* to *Philebus*

STPFG begins with the phrase "The true philosopher practices death" (THZ 9, 397) from *Phaedo*, which describes a dialogue that took place on the day of Socrates' death. As it is said that "the practice of death as a method of deliverance is philosophy" (THZ 9, 397) and that philosophy "is aligned with religious belief" (THZ 9, 398), this possesses an awareness that is both philosophical and religious. However, Tanabe states that, in contrast to the cognition of science—limited to relative cognition constrained by some conditions—philosophy aims at "unconstrained cognition of the absolute," that is, the acquisition of absolute knowledge (THZ 9, 399); it is necessary for philosophy to reflect "relativism made aware through criticism" (THZ 9, 401) while not falling prey to dogmatism.¹¹ Tanabe looks to

⁹ The term matter (ὕλη) is primarily an Aristotelian technical term and has only a general meaning in Plato, so one must be careful when using this term for Plato. Thus, for Plato, object/body (σῶμα) would be more appropriate, but following Tanabe's usage, the term matter is used in this article.

¹⁰ As will be discussed below, mention of Plato's theory of matter crosses the division of time in Tanabe's philosophy. Therefore, it is necessary to note the changes in his thought, especially when examining texts from different periods, such as before and after his logic of species.

¹¹ It is noteworthy that Tanabe finds a linkage between philosophy, religion, and science, originating with Plato. See, "We arrive at the wisdom of deliverance in philosophy through the path of knowledge. Its starting point is congruent with the criticality of science, and its point of return is congruent with religion as a position of deliverance and salvation. This is why philosophy is considered the medium through which science and religion are combined." (THZ 9, 405) In *Science, Philosophy and Religion* (Kagaku

Plato for the prototype. At the end of “I. Socrates’ Tragic Death Hymn and Philosophy” in STPFG, the purpose of this work is explained as follows.

I will investigate the dialectic behind *Phaedo*’s death practice and relate it to that of *Philebus*, which developed the most complete form of Plato’s late dialectic in the ethical subject existence. I thereby make it clear that the development of a coherent dialectic itself is the basis for Plato’s ideological unity throughout the middle and late periods. What I want to pursue in line with my own subjective awareness is the following: this development of Plato’s dialectic, which went beyond Plato himself, broke through the framework of Greek philosophy, corresponded with Hebrew religious thought, and was able to realize its most concrete basis in the gospel of Christ. (THZ 9, 419)

It is possible that Tanabe, while considering *Phaedo* as his starting point, refers to *Philebus* (*Phil.*) as the culmination of Plato’s dialectics.¹² Along with that, the passage also explains the reason for the title STPFG, by saying that the Christian faith in gospel lies beyond the limits of Hellenism, such as Plato. If one were to speculate why Tanabe states that Plato’s dialectic was thus completed in *Philebus*, this is because the idea that salvation—granted only to the few—must be universalized as a system of salvation for the many. By extending this concept, Tanabe connects Plato’s philosophy with Christianity.¹³ Tanabe’s focus on *Philebus* according to this perspective, is repeated at the end of Section 2, “The Development of Plato’s theory of ideas,” as follows:

Philebus is a dialogue that thoroughly investigates the unity of the one and the many by developing the logical structure of division in a purely formal way, interpreting this as the penetration of form and matter, and at the same time clarifying the relationship between the good and the pleasure. I have no doubt that this work is a general and ultimate attempt to solve the Platonic problem of the logical investigation of ideal existence, since it solves its ethical theme by means of logical and ontological dialectics. I have mentioned *Phaedo* as a representative of Idealism in Plato’s middle period, and I will take *Philebus* as a representative of late dialectics. By contrasting the two, I want to clarify the development of Platonism and its limitations. (THZ 9, 433)

These references to *Philebus* raise the following question: why was Tanabe interested in the later work *Philebus*, which is not considered a famous dialogue? Unlike the later dialogues, *Philebus*—like the early and middle dialogues—makes Socrates the central character, and the theme is the so-called theory of pleasure. In addition, unlike other works, the setting for the dialogue is not presented in detail, and the dialogue begins in the middle of a contest to determine whether pleasure or intelligence is good for humans. The contest was divided and held in two sessions. Why did Tanabe place so much importance

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to *tetsugaku to shūkyō* 科学と哲学と宗教) in 1950, which is also close in time to STPFG, there are also many references to Plato (and a few to Plotinus of Neoplatonism).

¹² Tanabe also repeats the development process from *Phaedo* to *Philebus*. (THZ 9, 446)

¹³ The suggestion is found, for example, in THZ 9, 431.

on this dialogue, which not only has such an uncluttered structure, but also does not possess a certain flourish like the dialogues of the middle period? The first possible reason for this is that the theory of matter is mentioned in *Philebus*, although indirectly. This argument is connected to that of *Timaeus* (*Tim.*), which like *Philebus*, is a later work. Another possible reason is that Tanabe understood such dialectics and theory of matter as having developed from the theme of *Philebus*—the theory of pleasure—leading to a broadly ethical theme. These points are discussed in the following sections.¹⁴

(3) Tanabe's understanding of *Philebus* and his interpretation of matter

Although *Philebus* seems to have received less attention than other works of the same period¹⁵ unlike *Timaeus*, there are many references through which Tanabe discusses its contents. A relatively early reference can be found in the sixth article of *Between Philosophy and Science* (*Kagaku to tetsugaku tonoda* 哲学と科学との間), published in 1937, entitled “The Concept of Matter in Ancient Philosophy and Modern Physics (*Kodai tetsugaku no shitsuryō gainen to gendai butsurigaku* 古代哲学の質料概念と現代物理学).”¹⁶

This “greater and smaller or the “indefinite dyad”¹⁷ corresponds to the first occasion of existence in *Philebus* (Plato calls it the first kind of existence), but that it belonged to the specialized doctrine in Plato's Academy is made clear by the passages in *Physics* IV, Chapter 2 (209b 14-15) This first occasion, the unlimited, is limited by the second occasion, the limit, and the third kind of existence

¹⁴ See, THZ 5, 297 etc.

¹⁵ It is well-known that there was some controversy regarding the date of *Timaeus*, placing it in the middle rather than the late period. Tanabe reads Alfred Edward Taylor and Francis Macdonald Cornford, who also consider *Timaeus* as a late work in the same group as *Sophistes*, *Statesman*, *Philebus*, and *Laws* (THZ 5, 292, etc.). Regarding the researchers related to the research of *Timaeus*, Tanabe mentions the following works. A. E. Taylor, *Plato*, London: Constable, 1908, A. E. Taylor, “Forms and Numbers: A Study in Platonic Metaphysics,” *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 35, No. 140, 1926, pp. 419-440, A. E. Taylor, *A Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1928, F. M. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy: A Study in the Origins of Western Speculation*, London: E. Arnold, 1912, F. M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology: the Timaeus of Plato Translated with a Running Commentary*, London: Kegan Paul, 1937.

¹⁶ The reference to *Philebus* can be found in “The Relation between Mathematics and Philosophy (*Sūgaku to tetsugaku no kankei* 数学と哲学トノ関係),” which was also in *Between Philosophy and Science* and first appeared in 1934 (THZ 5, 27-28). Although there is no specific reference to the name of Plato's work, a similar passage is contained in “The Development of Mathematics from the Viewpoint of the History of Ideas (*Shisōshi teki ni mitaru sūgaku no hattatsu* 思想史的に見たる数学の発達),” published in 1936, based on a lecture given in 1935 (THZ 5, 125).

¹⁷ Tanabe uses “greater and smaller or the “indefinite dyad” synonymously (THZ 5, 25), and even notes this as “excess or deficiency.” (THZ 5, 125, THZ 6, 337, THZ 9, 435, THZ 13, 320 etc.)

so-called mixture arises. In contrast, the dialectical ontology in *Philebus* posits that the cause of the mixture is the fourth kind of existence. (THZ 5, 292)

The four kinds of existence here correspond to those listed in *Philebus*: (1) infinite, (2) limited (*Phil.* 24C), (3) a combination of infinite and limited, and (4) a cause of the combination¹⁸ (*Phil.* 24D). However, this argument in *Philebus* is merely a tool to examine whether a life of pleasure or the life of thought is more appropriate for a good human life. In addition, because *Philebus* is not a dialogue that directly discusses matter or the body, interpreting the first kind here as matter or the body oversteps Plato's text. Tanabe also mentions Aristotle's *Physics* 209B, where he states that the receptacle of the *Timaeus*, or "space (χώρα)," is equivalent¹⁹ to matter, but does not directly refer to *Philebus* there.²⁰ Thus, Tanabe's interpretation, while reflecting on the discussion in *Philebus*, goes beyond Plato's text.²¹

"The Concept of Matter in Ancient Philosophy and Modern Physics" was first published in 1935, and from this period, Tanabe devoted himself to establishing the logic of species (*Shu no ronri* 種の論理). While this work seems to strongly reflect his early interest in the natural sciences, his view of Plato's later works is considered to be continued in STPFG. As Tanabe interpreted only the first of the four kinds of *Philebus* (infinite) in the previous quotation, and made no specific changes to the others, it seems that Tanabe's argument was intended to draw elements from Plato's later works, including *Philebus* which would lead to his absolute dialectic.²² Further, I have examined the passages that follow the aforementioned passage.

¹⁸ This fourth kind can also be described as the intellect that orders the universe (*Phil.* 30C), and it corresponds to the demiurge in *Timaeus*.

¹⁹ The equation of space and matter in *Timaeus* already appears in the 1925-1926 article "Intuitive Knowledge and the Thing in Itself (*Chokkan-chi to mono-jitrai* 直観知と物自体)" (THZ 4, 112-113), and it is understood that this theme had long been on Tanabe's mind. It is noteworthy that in this passage there is also a reference to the matter of the world of intellect, which Plotinus discusses in his *Enneads*, II 4, "On Matter". However, Tanabe, prior to the logic of species, did not adopt the idea of finding negative occasion in matter; therefore, it will not be discussed in this study.

²⁰ As Aristotle here mentions Plato's "unwritten doctrine" that the greater and the smaller were mentioned, Tanabe may be using this as a bridge to connect the first kind of *Philebus* with the matter.

²¹ This is similar to the case of "philosophy as a practice of death," which STPFG describes regarding *Phaedo*. See, Doi. *op. cit.*, 2023, pp. 52-56.

²² It is not clear from the text whether Tanabe came to interpret *Philebus* as a theory of matter that includes negative occasion to approximate his own argument. In this regard, Takehana points out in detail that Tanabe's interpretation of matter changes in the process of establishing the logic of species. Tekehana Yōsuke 竹花洋佑, "The Self-Nagitation of Species and the Concept of "Severing" (種の自己否定性と「切断」の概念)," *Studies in Japanese Philosophy*, vol. 12, 2015, pp. 89-93.

Plato's matter, which is identified with place or space simply as nonexistence²³, does not simply mean the empty receptacle as we think of it today in terms of space or place. It is thus known that place is both the receptacle and the principle of conflict that divides and vibrates what is receptive to it in opposite directions. (THZ 5, 292-293)

An interpretation that relies on Aristotle and departs from Plato's text is presented again, but a precise interpretation of Plato is not included in Tanabe's purpose. If so, it is necessary to note his intention to adopt this interpretation derived from Aristotle while deliberately using the arguments of famous scholars of the time, such as Léon Robin and A. E. Taylor. It is noteworthy that the matter is not only the receptacle (which, of course, reflects the place²⁴ of *Timaeus*), but also "the principle of the conflict." From the phrase "divides and vibrates ... in opposite directions" it is difficult to believe that this oppositional conflict occurs as a mind-body duality between the body and the soul. Instead, it can be perceived as follows: Tanabe is trying to read into Plato's matter the features that lead to negative occasions in the absolute dialectic, as matter differs from form and has the nature of opposition and conflict.²⁵ This was achieved through Aristotle's mediation from *Philebus* to *Timaeus*.²⁶

The connection of *Philebus* to *Timaeus* by such a discussion is more clearly set forth when we return to STPGF. In the following, *Philebus* is included in the discussion of the demiurge, the fabricator of the cosmic soul or body in *Timaeus*.

This transformation of absolute nothingness mediated by negation necessarily requires the function of producing mixture with matter and form. This is what was called the fourth kind of existence, the cause of mixture, which specifically means the soul. As mentioned above, the soul of the universe (the so-called craft god demiurge), which is the master of the action of universe formation to be

²³ This seems to be a word corresponding to Plato's *Sophistes*.

²⁴ In his 1948 *Demonstration of Christianity* (*Kirisutokyo no Bensho* キリスト教の辯証), Tanabe criticized the place of *Timaeus* not as a matter of negative occasion but as a departure from the dialectic. (THZ 10, 29)

²⁵ This reading is certainly a bit forced in that it tries to connect the matter itself to a negative occasion. However, Tanabe, referring frequently to Schelling, discusses the dynamism of matter and the body as "the principle of perplexing". It seems to correspond to the disorderly motion that is described in *Timaeus* as being possessed by objects prior to their creation, and to the vibrations of the receptacle, or space. Both are difficult passages in *Timaeus*, but it is not clear from Tanabe's writings whether he was aware of these passages in *Timaeus*.

²⁶ Although this should be considered not only in *Philebus* and *Timaeus* but also in Plato's later works, including *Sophistes* and *Laws*, it would be permissible to discuss the matter primarily in *Philebus* and *Timaeus*. See, Sawaguchi Shōichi 澤口昭肆, "The Metaphysics of Mathematics in Tanabe Hajime, (*Tanabe Hajime ni okeru sūgaku no keijijō-gaku* 田辺元における数学の形而上学)" Takeuchi Yoshinori, Mutō Kazuo, Tsujimura Kōichi (eds.), *Tanabe Hajime: Thoughts and Reminiscences* (*Tanabe Hajime: Shisō to Kaisō* 田辺元一思想と回想一), Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1991, p. 53.

compared to the production of art in the cosmology of *Timaeus*, and the human soul, which is compared to the human being as a microcosm, together form the fourth kind of existence as the subject of the action of forming mixture. (THZ 9, 443)

As discussed in *Philebus*, what is relevant to the cosmology of *Timaeus* is the cause of mixing: the fourth of the four kinds of existence (*Phil.* 23C sqq.),²⁷ which Plato calls intellect or wisdom (*Phil.* 30C) and not soul as Tanabe believes. Even though this brief passage relates to *Timaeus* in *Philebus*, the association of the intellect as the cause of mixing in *Philebus* with the demiurge of *Timaeus* as the intellect that orders the universe in cosmogenesis is appropriate. However, what makes Tanabe's interpretation of Plato unique is that he combines the aforementioned self-negation of matter with Plato's argument and also applies the negative occasion of nothingness to demiurge.

The action of this mixture, by the way, is a dialectical synthesis of forms mediated by the negativity of matter. Since it is nothing other than the realization of absolute nothingness, it must originate from the limitation of nothingness, which is independent of the division or opposition of the particulars. (THZ 9, 443)

It is characteristic that Tanabe's interpretation, while exceeding Plato's text, is not a mere perversion, but is constructed with a certain consistency and connected to Tanabe's own philosophy. Reading the negative occasion of matter as the realization of absolute nothingness in the workings of the demiurge also prepared Tanabe for connecting Platonism and Christianity in his later years.

(4) Development of matter as a negative occasion

Accordingly, Tanabe's interpretation of Plato, including his theory of matter, extends beyond the framework of natural philosophy. This is expected to lead to this discussion crossing from the East to the West. This is the same as the case of Tanabe's absolute dialectic,²⁸ which was discussed in STPFG, starting with Plato's *Phaedo*. Looking at the reference to *Philebus*' "indefinite dyad" in STPFG, which was the starting point for the present study, we find the following characteristic remark in "3. The Dialectic of Ethical Ideal Ontology".

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²⁷ In *Philebus*, there is an interaction in which the need for "something fifth with the power of decomposition" is also presented and Socrates replies, "I don't think we need it at the moment". (*Phil.* 23D-E) Although Tanabe does not seem to go into depth about it, the discussion of the four kinds in *Philebus* and the non-existence presented by *Sophistes* seems to be somewhat confused in Tanabe. (THZ 9, 441-446)

²⁸ Tanabe's misreading or intentional reading of Plato has sometimes led to a creative interpretation, so to speak, that also connects Plato to Eastern religions and thoughts. In STPFG, his interpretation of "the philosopher practices death" in *Phaedo* is an example. See, Doi, *op. cit.*, 2023, pp. 61-63.

So what is it that makes an individual transcend the lowest species? It transcends the indivisible form of the lowest species, so of course it is not by form. There is no other way but by “indefinite dyad” of matters that surpass or deficient while defeating the moderation of the form. The cause is matter as the principle of the perplexity of *Timaeus*. In other words, it is matter as a principle that moves in a wandering way against the laws that form existence. This is compared to the Buddhist concept of karma by the concept of necessity (*anankē*), which appears in the same dialogue. (THZ 9, 436)

As mentioned earlier, Tanabe connects *Philebus* to *Timaeus* by interpreting “indefinite dyad” as matter, but the product of necessity in *Timaeus* is the body, which is opposed to the soul of universe or human spoken of as the product of the intellect. In *Timaeus*, the body is essential to the universe, but even “before” the ordering of the universe, its kind of archetype moves in disorder (*Tim.* 52D-53B),²⁹ and even after the creation of the universe, it is not wholly subject to the intellect, but also possesses an unfavorable influence. How can Tanabe’s matter, which was discussed only in the context of natural philosophy, be connected to Buddhist karma that also contains ethical elements? This junction of natural philosophy and ethics forms the background for Tanabe’s integrated discussion of *Timaeus* and *Philebus*. The details can be found in the passage following the aforementioned quote:

Karma is not a natural inevitability, but a subjective inevitability derived from the actions and customs we have accumulated from long ago, and its root resides in the so-called freedom from evil. As in the myth of Er which Plato told at the end of *Republic*, our destiny is inevitable, but in fact it is nothing more than a lot that we freely choose and draw. The inevitability of it is fully endorsed by our liberty. The matter that Plato thought of is the necessity that is underpinned by such liberty, the necessity of liberty’s own negation, which must be included within liberty as the occasion of its negation. Therefore, it is the very equivalent of Buddhist karma. In short, it is the central conception of the dialectical worldview, common to East and West, that matter is matter because it is a negative occasion of liberty that never leaves the liberty of the subject. (THZ 9, 436-437)

As Plato’s matter was supposed to comprise “division and conflict,” Tanabe’s understanding has a moment of self-negation within it. Thus, matter paradoxically (or inherently, according to Tanabe’s

²⁹ This disordered motion of the body before the creation of the universe is one of the difficult themes in *Timaeus* interpretation, also related to eternity and time. A well-known study published around the same time as Tanabe on this subject is Gregory Vlastos, “The Disorderly Motion in the *Timaios*,” *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1939, pp. 71-83. Since this is a specialized journal article on ancient philosophy, it is assumed that Tanabe, who had been buying Western books from a catalog, probably did not see such a journal, especially after moving to Kita-Karuizawa. See recollections by Inoue Tatsuzō 井上達三 (a former employee of Chikuma Shobō), who assisted Tanabe Hajime with his personal shopping. Inoue Tatsuzō, “Tanabe Sensei’s Letter (*Tanabe-Sensei no Shokan* 田辺先生の書簡),” Takeuchi, Mutō, Tsujimura (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 356.

dialectic) realizes liberty. Nevertheless, in *Timaeus*, matter, or the body, is not a negative occasion for liberty. This is because such themes are not part of the dialogue goals. In Plato, at least for humans, evil inherently depends on the state of the human soul and is not directly attributed to the body. Nor is “God not responsible,” as is declared in the prenatal lot drawing in the “myth of Er” in *Republic* (617D). However, *Timaeus* tells us that while suffering the “necessary” effects of the body, humans must realize the best life assigned to them by becoming like god,³⁰ the divine universe. There is also the famous phrase in *Gorgias* that the body is the graveyard of the soul (493A), and the aspect of seeing the matter as a barrier for the humankind has a certain persuasive power with regard to Plato.

The following paths are highlighted: the confluence of Tanabe’s absolute dialectic, which takes self-denial as its key point, and the Aristotelian-derived theory that regards *Philebus*’ “indefinite dyad” as matter. Therefore, the body, which is considered a necessity in the context of *Timaeus*, was ethicalized and interpreted as a theme of subject and liberty that can be understood in both the East and the West. By uniting Greek philosophy with Tanabe Hajime’s original discussion, Plato’s dialogues can be reinterpreted as having a vital interrelationship, and the whole picture may have acquired a vision that transcends the framework of Western philosophy. In STPFG, the following is also asserted about the necessity mentioned earlier.

Plato quoted the proverb that necessity, even god, cannot force this (741 St.). In this way, it is appropriate to say that in the latter part of his life, his thought was embodied in a position of human consciousness that was in consonance with the social revolution. The consonance of existence and innovation, of awareness and enlightenment and social liberation, must be at the very core of Platonism. The uniting of philosophy and politics is its necessary consequence. (THZ 9, 457)

Here, “741 St.” refers to Plato’s last work, “Not even God can resist necessity” (741A) in *Laws*, Book 5.³¹ Tanabe emphasized Plato’s dialogue *Laws* more than famous *Republic*.³² This is because he highly

³⁰ This expression appears in *Theaetetus* 176B, which the author has examined as the underlying theme of Plato’s religious thought, focusing mainly on *Timaeus*.

³¹ Tanabe often uses “St.” when referring to Plato, which is thought to refer to Stallbaum’s edition of Plato’s Complete Works. In this case, the number 741 is not a page from Stallbaum’s edition (p. 65), but from the Stephanus’ edition of Plato’s Complete Works, which is also attached to the same book and is the standard for indicating the location of Plato’s works. Book V of *Laws* begins with a discussion of respect for soul, body, and property, and tells us to avoid evil and live for the good, and that the state discussed in *Laws* is not the best but only the second best (739A). This second best position is accorded because unlike *Republic* which attempts to establish an ideal state, *Laws* take a pragmatic approach, so to speak, of building a country that is as good as possible by setting forth laws to be enacted. Tanabe understood these changes in Plato and evaluated favorably (THZ 9, 456 etc.).

³² Against the various dialogues of Plato’s middle period represented in *Republic*, Tanabe criticizes that they “lack the mediating idea of renewing oneself simultaneously with the state through the practice of

values the argument of *Laws* that the best, like the ideal state, is difficult to realize in real human society; therefore, the only way is to practice the second best. Plato's *Laws* are often seen as the product of Plato's compromise with a practical line after two failed attempts in Sicily. However, if the earlier interpretations of matter are considered together, it would seem that Tanabe sees in *Laws* not only a deepening of Plato's dialectic, but also a precedent for the practice of philosophy toward social renovation and human salvation. Nevertheless, from this point forward, not the works of Plato in his final years, but Christianity is positioned as the embodiment of his thought, and the discussion proceeds beyond philosophy and into the realm of religion.³³

Thus, the matter that Tanabe interprets as a negative occasion in Plato, while interconnecting several later dialogues, can be said to be the starting point from which the dialectic expands into the broader sphere of Eastern thought and religion—a sphere that is not limited to Western philosophy. However, this dialectic was not a straightforward progression to what it should have been—either because Aristotle is spoken of as not having reached Plato's level and Plotinus as having gone too far (THZ 9, 398-399), or as Plotinus is said to have been overcome by Christianity. In the following section, I examine Tanabe's references to the post-Platonic period, especially to the Neoplatonist Plotinus, to understand how the theory of matter that Tanabe perceived in later works of Plato could be developed.

(5) Matter as a Point of Bifurcation

As examined thus far, Tanabe's interpretation, which uses the "indefinite dyad" reported by Aristotle to find matter as a negative occasion in *Philebus* includes developments beyond Plato's later dialogues. In particular, this will be connected to Christianity, as the title of the work STPFG suggests. However, while the treatise puts the continuity between philosophy and religion into perspective,³⁴ and Tanabe's ideas allow for it, the insistence that Platonism develops into Christianity and is completed may seem to be a leap in arguments. This is because the philosophy that succeeded Plato (but also merged with religion) was Neoplatonism, as represented by Plotinus. In this section, I examine the background of Tanabe's higher evaluation of Christianity than Neoplatonism as a successor to Platonism, and will combine this with the theory of matter that we have discussed so far.

Tanabe evaluates Plato's later works as the core of Platonism in terms of feasible practice, and in "V. Existential Cooperation in Existential Philosophy," he points out that the existential philosophy of Karl Theodor Jaspers and others lacks an attitude toward social renovation. There, Plotinus is criticized (THZ 9, 464), along with the fact that the existential coexistence advocated by Jaspers falls into a mysticism that lacks negative mediation and seeks unmediated unification. Tanabe cites Suzuki Shōsan 鈴木正三

social innovation and social liberation". (THZ 9, 455) This criticism is also common to those against Plotinus.

³³ This is discussed in STPFG in "7. The Combination of Spiritual Renovation and Social Liberation in Gospel." Its content is reflected in *Demonstration of Christianity*, although it is inclined toward an evaluation of Christianity and a criticism of Platonism.

³⁴ In STPFG, the connection from philosophy or ethics to religion was already in Tanabe's mind in the sequence from *Philebus* to *Timaeus*. (THZ 9, 441)

—a Zen monk who was originally a warrior in the early Edo period as a dialectical-like practice that is rooted in the “logic of self-negation” like Plato’s (unlike Jaspers’ and Plotinus’). (THZ 9, 470) His Zen “learning from death” is claimed to be a philosophical way that is possible for “non-superhuman, ordinary people” (THZ 9, 477) as well as for Socrates in *Phaedo*. But even this Zen of learning death “must always carry out the struggle of love in the practice of social liberation to fulfill the demand for the attainment of existence, transcendence and liberation” (THZ 9, 479); and since that love cannot of course be Platonic love (ἔρωσ) of self-power (*jiriki* 自力), it does not escape “becoming a one-sided abstraction.” (THZ 9, 481) A form of Christianity that could overcome these difficulties and practice “spiritual renovation and social liberation”³⁵ in history would be asserted as the result of Platonism’s self-transcendence, that is, dialectics.

Thus the unity of the absolute good and its limitation of the individual, which was the restriction of Plato’s dialectic, is established only by religious faith. It is not only in the blessed moments of the chosen sage, as in the mystical intuition of Plotinus. It is a blessing that is always available to the ordinary man who has fallen into evil and sin, the prodigal son who has left his father’s house, the ordinary sheep who has wandered away from the shepherd’s hand. ... In the love of the returning phase of religion, the individual limitation of reality by the purification of the good, as required by the Platonic dialectic, is satisfied. There can be no longer any doubt about the self-transcendence of Platonism being completed in gospel faith in Christ. (THZ 9, 484-485)

The “self-transcendence of Platonism,” which was included in the title of the work, was the result of Platonism’s thorough implementation of the dialectic through the medium of negative occasions, including matters found in *Philebus*. Therefore, Christianity, with its strong self-negation, such as love as death, is more likely to complete Platonism by practicing the dialectic of Platonism even more strongly, benefiting people more broadly. In contrast, “mystical intuition”³⁶ is the reason why Neoplatonist Plotinus, who likewise belongs to Platonism, is considered a blessing only by a few. As mentioned previously, Tanabe acknowledges mysticism as one of the methods of philosophy, but criticizes it as contrary to dialectics in that it demands unmediated unification with the subject, and his criticism goes to Plotinus and Nishida. Related to this unmediatedness that Tanabe criticizes is the presence or absence of a dynamic moment of self-negation. This is connected to the aforementioned theory of matter of Plato’s late dialogue, to the extent that Tanabe interpreted it. Let us analyze some of the later passages.

³⁵ Tanabe places the simultaneous fulfillment of these two as the function of religion (THZ 7, 483).

³⁶ Tanabe’s criticism of this mystical intuition is often directed at Nishida along with Plotinus (THZ 7, 322-323 etc.). In response to this, Nishida wrote in a strong tone in the letter, “I wonder if that person, who only asserts a mystical intuition about me, has really read my writings.” Not only this, but the question will be raised as to whether Tanabe really understood religion and mysticism. Takeda Atsushi, Klaus Riesenhuber, Kosaka Kunitsugu, Fujita Masakatsu (eds.), *Collected Works of Nishida Kitarō* (*Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集), Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2007, Vol. 23, p. 310.

Thus, if repentance is an ontological awareness of human renovation or transformation, unlike the psychological experience of regret that belongs to self-power, ... there is no doubt that it must be thoroughly integrated into the practice of death. This is why the Socratic and Platonic idea that philosophy is the practice of death is represented in my so-called “philosophy as metanoetics” concept. Regarding the practice of death here, it is inevitable for us to take the mediation of learning death, in obedience to the significance of “Zen of learning death” mentioned earlier. (THZ 9, 486)

Here, the practice of death in *Phaedo*, which first appeared in STPFG, seems to be embodied by the acquisition of the content of “Zen of learning death.” (THZ 9, 475) If there is anything that provides a philosophical foundation for the self-negation of life that is not conceptual and abstract as the practice of death, it would be Tanabe’s matter theory attributed to *Philebus*, which is considered the perfection of Plato’s late dialectic. In contrast, in the case of Plotinus, whose mystical intuition Tanabe criticizes as lacking the mediation of a negative occasion, it is easy to imagine that from Tanabe’s point of view (which would be unfair for Plotinus, who considers himself a legitimate Platonist), the theory of matter, which generates a negative occasion from the dynamism of self-negation, is weakly reflected in Plotinus’s intuition. If so, it is conceivable that, in Tanabe, the theory of matter is located at the point of bifurcation between Plotinus, who went too far from Plato’s dialectic and fell into the unmediated, and Christianity, who completed Platonism as a dialectic by deeply confronting self-negation and its occasions.

(6) Conclusion

How Plato is received and interpreted in Tanabe Hajime has been discussed focusing on the theory of matter in STPFG and related texts. While Tanabe’s interpretation went beyond Plato’s text to involve Plato in his own assertions, his interpretation was made with a certain degree of consistency based on the latest research at the time, and revealed an aspect of extending Plato into the realm of religion and Eastern thought. This is similar to the case of philosophy as a practice of death, which was discussed in STPFG, with reference to *Phaedo*. In addition, the degree to which the theory of matter reflected Tanabe’s absolute dialectic was considered the point that separated Neoplatonism from Christianity as a legitimate or insufficient successor, even though they were regarded as belonging to the same Platonism. Therefore, this study is conscious of Neoplatonism and Plotinus.

The interpretation of the theory of matter in Plato’s later dialogue was a significant factor in providing originality to Tanabe’s argument and expanding it to other thoughts. Starting from a discussion of natural philosophy, Tanabe’s framework of absolute dialectics did not divide the philosophy of Plato, Christianity as a religion, and Neoplatonism as an idea that crossed philosophy and religion, but rather provided a continuous view of the three as if they were a continuum of gradations. Considering that Tanabe’s intention was to combine philosophy with science, this is an interesting achievement even today.

As is already known, Nishida and other Buddhist criticize Tanabe’s understanding of Pure Land Buddhism and Nembutsu. Of course, this criticism is presented equally in Christianity, where the fundamental theme is the encounter with Jesus Christ and the way we face God, and in Neoplatonism, where the principal theme is the experience of unification with the One. In other words, depending on how one evaluates Tanabe’s understanding of religion, this study of Tanabe’s interpretation of the theory

of matter in Plato's later works and its relationship to religion may be meaningless. Nevertheless, it is important to trace the path of Tanabe's contemplation across ancient and modern philosophies and religions based on his references to Plato and other ancient philosophies, regardless of the validity of his understanding of religion and related thoughts.

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