

# THE MANIFESTATION OF AN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY THROUGH NATSUME SOSEKI'S CONCEPT OF INDIVIDUALISM (私の個人主義)

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**ABSTRACT:** According to Natsume Soseki's stance of being an individual, he offers us a sense of clarity and objectivity to view society from afar. In Soseki's clear-minded viewpoints, he had created a personal and more individualized philosophy that was devoid of political rhetoric and sectarianism. He had emphasized the path toward truth that can be found in each of us since there are no obstacles in our solitary journey within. In his definition and concept of "individualism", he stressed the importance of establishing one's own philosophy toward education as a teacher. This paper in brevity addresses how Soseki's individualism may be applied for English educators here in Japan as well as in other countries. At times, it can be a constant struggle in keeping up with the ongoing changes based on new research from various academic disciplines in the teaching field. This can be described as the delicate balancing act of creating effective lessons to develop language proficiency skills for English as Second Language learners (ESL). Moreover, language educators must meet the standards of internationalization for today's ongoing economic and political growth as a nation as a whole. Upon further review of Natsume Soseki's writings, the ideals of progress can stem from the individual teacher who bases his or her own belief systems as influenced by any given society. In understanding our own individualism from Natsume Soseki's neutral viewpoints, he signals us to be more aware of the inner truths that lie within each of us. In pursuit of an ongoing global discussion that may help us piece together the necessary transitions to keep pace with the constancy of societal flux, the message contained in this paper is to promote a more harmonious chorus of universal positivism within our educational system today. Most importantly, each individualized impact can add to a greater evolving consciousness as a whole, and in short, this is something that we should all aim for in the near future.

**Key Words:** Belief Systems, Collectivism, Cultural and Social Values, Educational Philosophy, English as a Second Language (ESL), Individualism

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid social changes and cultural dissociation from Japan's ancient past during the advent of Meiji Period in 1868 led to a re-examination of the traditional values that led toward the westernization of Japan at various institutionalized educational levels. During this time period, there was a new openness, a sense of curiosity as well as the experimentation of the western ideas that flowed onto the shores of the Japanese seacoasts. While these social changes were occurring during the early part of the Meiji period, there was one writer, Natsume Soseki who expressed his angst of his personal dislocation from greater Japanese society, especially during and after his time in London, England. One can find the inner and psychological struggles that may have provided an array of great literary works from which Soseki's philosophical underpinnings of becoming an isolationist from general society remains intact. Even through his sense of alienation of greater society, Natsume Soseki's eloquent prose provides us with a unique perspective that defines what Japanese individualism means to the general public-at-large. In his formation of Japanese individualism, Soseki's

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definition may translate to the greater global community even today. In doing so, his words have opened us up to revisit and explore our own belief systems as educators. From this cultural perspective, our own sense of individualism can be reviewed and developed as well.

### **NATSUME SOSEKI'S VIEWS ON INDIVIDUALISM or “Wakakushi no Kojinshugi”**

During the Meiji period, the debates over literature were veiled in discussions of national identity, and in particular, the main concern was Japan's place in relation to the expanding world. In retrospect, the “West” had cast its influence shadowing over Japan's cultural and social values during that time period. Eto Jun writes, “No matter how radically (the West) may (have) differed from one another in their literary and political opinions, Meiji writers shared in the dominant national mission of their time: the creation of a new civilization that would bring together the best features of East and West while remaining Japanese as its core (Eto, p. 603).

As a Meiji writer, Natsume Soseki's addresses national identity by expanding on the role of an individual within society. Accordingly, Soseki is not only inclusive of the general sentiments among the Japanese people, but he also adds another layer of identity by going deeper into the individual psyche. Specifically, Soseki's definition of individualism defines “personhood” by his or her experiences in life. It is our experiences in life that provide us with a source of reference upon which we can interpret the world around us. If one can imagine the central core of a person's spirit, and how it emanates outward from the heart, then you can understand what Soseki's is trying to convey with regard to our individualism. In this way, the “I” in “Watakushi” is our unique stamp on the world as interpreted by our senses, and how our thoughts are expressed to others from a very personal viewpoint.

### **NATSUME SOSEKI'S JOURNEY WITHIN**

During the early part of the Meiji Period, Natsume Soseki was selected to become a representative of Japan for a two-year educational stay in England. He was considered to be the first official student sponsored by the Japanese Emperor Meiji to study literature abroad. In his book, “My Individualism”, Natsume Soseki mentions that this was an “unbearable” trip for him, and that the two years spent abroad were unpleasant at times, especially when Englishmen gave their opinions on literature. Oftentimes, Soseki suffered from not having his own sense of literature to lend support to his perceptions based on his Japanese cultural upbringings. From this feeling of angst, Soseki created his own sense of the philosophy of literature from an individual perspective. These personal experiences were the roots of Soseki's “Philosophical Foundation” for literature at that time in history. In this “Foundations” book, Soseki had an extreme degree of self-referential remarks in many of its sections. Specifically when he was about to analyze a passage from Shakespeare's *Henry V*, he stops suddenly in his writings, and decides to “dissect his feelings” instead of the literature at hand. In Soseki's own remarks, he states the task of unfolding his own feelings were better conveyed to readers than his intellectualization of a Shakespearean poetic style within *Henry V*. Thus, these may be the initial stirrings of what individualism could be liken to from his point of view. (Translated Natsume Soseki's Individualism by Tsunematsu 2004)

In Natsume Soseki's most memorable speech at Gakushuin University in 1914, he succinctly states the following on the issue of national identity and the definition of individualism:

“I am not suggesting that we have to take England as our model, but in short, I do believe that there is no true freedom without the notion of duty. This means that a purely selfish freedom cannot exist in society. If it were to appear it would immediately be rejected by people in general who would trample it under their feet. That is certain! Gentlemen, I hope you are free men. At the same time, I am eager that you should understand what the term “duty” means. I openly profess that I conceive of individualism as having this precise meaning and I will not hesitate for a moment to affirm it loud and clear.”

In this general quote from his famous speech, therein lies the truth in our commitment to be part of something greater than ourselves. This type of expressive self-assertion separates us from our immediate self-centered needs. There is no wrestling of conscious ego if that individual contribution helps those members within the greater society. In this regard, Natsume Soseki reminds us of our sense of duty to society at all costs. In doing so, this thoughtful and beneficial act eliminates that self-centered egoism and brings us closer to our

sense of humility that evokes our grace. With regard to the profound remarks made by Natsume Soseki at that time, he had affirmed the presence of a collectivism that signifies the duty of a given individual within society, but what does this mean in terms of such obstacles that political groupings and factions that favor more of the powerful as well as the influence of money rather than the ideals of what is good and evil in this world of ours?

According to Natsume Soseki's own words, he clarifies this position of an individual by stating the following: "if we put it more simply, individualism replaces political sectarianism with notions based on good and evil, reason and unreason." Here, Soseki talks about the circumstances that make it impossible for human beings to remain in harmony with one another without political discourse. In this case, this is when we feel most connected to the feelings of solitude and isolation from greater society whereby our own social and cultural values are *not* part of a majority's views. This same political or social grouping may *not* listen to an individual's voice that can illuminate a genuine truth within a given situation much like the metaphorical candle on a dark night. In that illuminated candle in the night, there is a sense of clarity and peacefulness to those seeking solace from the ambiguity and social discontent stemming from political rhetoric.

### **ISOLATING THE MEANING BEHIND NATSUME'S INDIVIDUALISM**

Natsume Soseki's view of individualism can be succinctly expressed as follows: his words speaks to us from the heart, in that, our own views based on our beliefs can answer questions of relative importance in our relationships with each other as well as our philosophical musings of the meaning of life itself. The search for answers within our own belief systems is something that takes us on a deeper, inner journey that lies in the very psychological core of our beings as an individual. This form of psychological manifestation of a divine spirit or centered soulfulness is what makes us believe in the significance of establishing, recognizing and respecting our sense of individuality in society. In taking this path toward self-awareness, we can be described as truth seekers of our own destinies that have the power to manifest acts of good will in our conscious desire for the betterment of humanity as a greater whole. Whether this stems from our "duty" as Natsume Soseki strongly suggests, therein differentiates what may be considered self-inflated egoism to an individualism that is connected to our social responsibilities within society.

### **EGO AND HUMILITY IN MANIFESTING OUR EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY**

Some modern-day philosophers say that the truth is the sovereignty of the self relies on being truthful with regard to our relationship to ourselves in connection to the world around us. If fulfillment was a spiritual journey from a religious perspective, then our sojourn is *not* limited to only our religious faith, but encompassing how we define our own individuality within that belief system in society. To re-construct the quest as defined by Natsume Soseki about the relationship of the self with our connectivity to our language-learning students as an English instructor, then the manifestation of such ideals would require some soulful contemplation. If the concept of individualism as applied toward English teachers in Japan and based on Natsume Soseki's famous speech, there is a sense of duty among us to provide the best lessons within each student's expectations so that something can blossom from them as future contributing members of society. In short, the careful balancing act between "who we are" as individuals and/or the "ego" part of selves and in taking into account how humility is realized stems from how we cultivate and grow our personhood from child to adulthood based on our cultural and social values.

### **FRENCH PHILOSOPHER SIMONE WEIL VIEWS ON HUMILITY AND SOCIAL SERVICE**

As per French philosopher and social activist Simone Weil (1909–1943), her essays during her lifetime contained many of her insights between the notion of individuality as bonded within humanity at great lengths. Her words remind us of what we must do as individuals in society, and she states as follows: "the intellectual order, the virtue of humility is nothing more nor less that the power of attention." Although, she was Christian in her faith, she had studied other religious viewpoints, and had designated that one faith is *not* better than others, but that each belief system was unique onto its own merits. She wrote extensively about the connection between our responsibilities in the social world from an individual stance.

In comparative similarity with Natsume Soseki's duty, she had a strong sense of defending the whole of

society from her political activism in Europe, but this, indeed, leads us down the self toward understanding the meaning of what humility and selflessness means to each of us. Thus, forging our identity as part of our ego that serves society from our unique contributions provides us with that vital balance in manifesting our personal educational philosophy within our teaching practices. In contemplative analysis of both writers, the duty and responsibility as teachers can be described as the harvesting of self-evidential truths that radiate from our own hearts as caring professionals in the classroom environment. As educators here in Japan, our service to our greater communities is based on our students' learning needs, and in doing so, this elicits Natsume Soseki's notion of individualism that connotes our sense of duty as well.

## **AN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY BASED ON OUR INDIVIDUALISM**

In comparing the Japanese educational systems to others, there can be a overarching basis for discussion that relates to the notion of individualism that complements an individual educator's belief system. As per Natsume Soseki's starting point is to see the relationship between the ego and the outside world. He describes the importance of the phenomenon of awareness that is based on our own individualism. In Natsume Soseki's "Foundations," he suggests that the Japanese word, "Renzoku-sha-sou" implies that such awareness undergoes changes and develops in a continuous mapping of progress through constant improvements within a scope of time. With detailed layers of description, Soseki's awareness of the self and the process of development refers to the following tenets: (1) awareness must comprise several elements, (2) these elements must experiences ups and downs, (3) insofar as the ups and downs emerge, the awareness of these element must be clear, and (4) as the development of awareness is subject to a certain extent to rules, the question becomes singularly complicated. He states in a given remembered line: "Awareness is the only thing of which we can be certain." This awareness of Soseki's had provided us with the proof of our own existence in the continuity of time. In this way, we can undoubtedly have a sense of development from start to a certain point in the near future where our sense of achievements are indeed, measurable and obtainable. Of course, this can be done *only* when we make up our minds to activate our will and determination through the senses or perception of reality based on our own intellectual capacity and knowledge about ourselves as individuals.

## **HOW TO MANIFEST ONE'S PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION?**

In brief, the general steps in formulating one's philosophy have been provided here as a general reference as more can be garnered from other available online websites, but in any given instance, this can be easily expanded accordingly to one's unique and individualized view of what the educational stake is for one's students in a given class. The following questions are answered according to your belief system as it relates to the curriculum developed at any educational institution. In this way, the concentration of effort addresses the following statements in your words. Such questions relate to the (1) the purpose of education, (2) the role of the student in education, (3) the role of the teacher in education, and finally (4), the role of the teacher in the community.

## **WRITING ONE'S PHILOSOPHY BY PROFESSOR JURGEN COMB'S**

One article relating to the philosophy of education merits some attention in the mission to create one's educational philosophy for teachers. The tenets in this article for such a philosophical foundation can be based simply on one's belief systems and can be connected to the sense of "duty" and "awareness" as per Natsume Soseki's individualism. Based on Professor Jurgen Combs website, he states in brief that "it is important to be aware of your own educational philosophy since it helps one to focus on making the decisions made when planning for lessons and in implementing them for your students. Further, Combs states that it is "through the writing of one's own philosophy, the natural occurrence that comes from this self-analysis is the ability to see one's own goals and values that are the important part of the educational process, and in this way, one can be a creative endeavor of choice. "In short, the educational philosophy is a description of a teacher's goals and beliefs for one's coursework for students. There really is no such thing as one main philosophy that a teacher should subscribe to in the wake of deciding on the mission to establish one's own educational philosophy. In short, our philosophies are a reflection of our own beliefs, experiences and training. Conclusively, one's philosophy can change a person as one matures in gaining additional experiences, and the starting point relies on fundamental questions that relate to one's beliefs in the educational process as a whole for a given program and school.

## **SHARING OUR INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES TO THE CLASSROOM**

From an individualized perspective, one should ask questions that relate to “why you want to teach as well as defining your own role as a teacher in a given program, and to determine the community of learners at your school. Most importantly, it would be reasonable to ask oneself this basic question: what do you want to teach your students? Should your English lessons include current global issues in order to expand the learner’s horizon to cross-cultural perspectives as well? Of course, this will be all up to the teacher’s prerogative and well-founded ideas of what are the important social and cultural values that form the basis of society. Teaching social values that may include a more egalitarian viewpoint or a gender-neutral range of thoughts that can be freely expressed in class in order to render more discussion points among classmates can be vital for global awareness. In evaluating and separating facts based on scientific inquiries and/or researched news articles, videos and Internet information that form the basis of public opinions on a given current event can provide a broad range and scope of ideas that encompass and affect each and everyone of us in our daily lives within the family unit, local communities and society-at-large. In this way, the role of an educator is the pivotal point where the inquiring mind can explore beyond the classroom, and in forming the basis of an individual student’s compass to seek knowledge that relates to him or her as a matter of genuine interest and academic pursuits in the near future.

## **CONCLUSORY REMARKS**

Although, Natsume Soseki may have been preoccupied with his own sense of belonging and identity which consequently was the fabric of his writing style as seen today, his popularity can still be seen in the ¥1000 note which circulates in our daily lives. This may be a gentle reminder that his words on “individualism” does not necessarily mean that the Japanese should forsake its own cultural values and traditions in the acceptance of the westernization process as a nation during the Meiji period. Even in the tides for social and technological modernization that are part of our contemporary life, the words of Natsume Soseki’s “Individualism” spoken at Gakushuin University long ago still echo from beyond to call our attention on being true to oneself through one’s beliefs and values. In review of the consummate observer as posited in Natsume Soseki’s writings, the mediation of our senses and emotions that originate from our ego anchors our inner stability through our intelligence, perceptions and our own free will through an active form of determinism. Despite any and all social changes in society, the tenets of Natsume Soseki’s definition of individualism allows each of us to grow incrementally, and at our own pace in the world of ideas. In this way, the creative force that belies in each of them as teachers can be recognized as a contribution that deserves merit in the form of humility and grace. Thus, the nature and strength of an individual’s creative inner force can be attainable as it is within our immediate grasp of self-knowledge within our own individualism. As the pool of sharing and knowledge transcends beyond borders, this can radiate beyond a scope that can affect social circles that can expand in larger loops that encircle us, rather than separating us from the whole of humanity.

## **FINAL THOUGHT: GROUP-CENTERED INDIVIDUALISM**

In this way, there is a respectable and noteworthy responsibility and duty to bear for a teacher in any field of discipline, but the most important aspect of the group-oriented team effort within a curriculum or department is that education is something that affects and shared with everyone in Japan or in any country for that matter. In the stillness of time that marks our efforts for continuous improvements as teachers, there is the undeniable truth that resounds each time we hear the footsteps of a student walking away from you down a hallway to the outside world from one’s classroom. It is that notion that each forward step is in a direction toward an unknowing, yet the potential future possibility of chance discoveries as well as new frontiers of challenges to meet and understand for that particular student. In sum, there is always that view where each and every individual student’s progressive mark can represent a collective win in society-at-large, especially when this emanates from a caring and humane perspective about our educational philosophy as it reflects and manifests in our own belief systems. In the final analysis, this is what makes it all worthwhile for each and every one of us in any given society as part and parcel of a universal truth found in our individualism.

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