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Essay

MA as Ethical Relationality: Rethinking Temporality, Technology, and the Sacred in Contemporary Japanese Philosophy

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Abstract: This paper reconfigures the Japanese philosophical concept of MA (間)—commonly rendered as “interval,” “gap,” or “space between”—into a robust ethical, ontological, and epistemological framework for the contemporary world. Drawing from traditional Japanese aesthetics, Zen metaphysics, and relational philosophies, this work explores how MA operates as an ethical force of attunement, co-presence, and sacred temporality. Engaging thinkers such as Watsuji Tetsurō, Kitarō Nishida, Yasuo Yuasa, and contemporary scholars like Hiroshi Yamaguchi and Yuk Hui, the essay positions MA as a non-anthropocentric ethics in tune with Indigenous, Afrocentric, and feminist new materialist thought. The analysis further bridges MA with issues in AI, posthuman design, environmental ethics, and cognitive justice, offering a way of being that resists extractivist rationalities and recuperates rhythm, silence, and reverence for the in-between. Ultimately, this paper argues for a relational and sacred reworlding—where MA becomes the horizon for ethical design, political imagination, and planetary care.

Keywords: MA; Japanese philosophy; relational ethics; temporality; Kyoto School; Hiroki Azuma; Masahiro Morioka; Yuriko Saito; Hitoshi Nagai; Kazuki Fujitaka; Kosuke Shimizu; AI ethics; posthumanism; sacred space; inter-being; digital anthropology; Society 5.0

1. Introduction: Rethinking Ethical Relationality in a Fragmented Age

The twenty-first century has witnessed an intensification of fragmentation: ontological disjunctions between humans and nature, epistemological ruptures between technoscience and traditional wisdom, and ethical rifts born of hyper-individualism and planetary extractivism. Amidst this epochal crisis—technological acceleration, environmental devastation, and spiritual disenchantment—there arises an urgent need to reconceive the foundational terms of ethical life. It is in this liminal moment, this historical *ma* between paradigms, that Japanese philosophy offers a radical alternative. At the heart of this rethinking is the concept of MA (間), which rather than being merely a spatial or temporal gap, signifies a resonant field of co-emergence—of becoming-together in sacred attunement.

Far from being an abstract or marginal notion, MA lies at the very core of Japanese ontological sensibility. Rooted in Shinto animism, Zen silence, and aesthetic minimalism, MA becomes a sacred and ethical infrastructure for inter-being—a space not of emptiness but of fecund potential, where relational becoming replaces categorical being. This article argues that MA offers a profound ethical reorientation: a shift from autonomy to attunement, from mastery to mutuality, from extraction to reverence. It does so by engaging key Japanese thinkers—classical and contemporary—and situating their insights in dialogue with global relational thought, from Ubuntu and Indigenous cosmologies to Karen Barad’s agential realism and Arturo Escobar’s *pluriverse*. Through this transdisciplinary engagement, the paper illuminates how MA might constitute a planetary ethic for our time.

2. The Ontopoetics of MA: Emptiness, Place, and the Generative In-Between

The aesthetic and metaphysical foundations of *MA* are embedded deeply in traditional Japanese arts—Noh, ikebana, haiku, sumi-e—and in their philosophical counterparts. Yuriko Saito (2021) underscores the aesthetic principle of *not filling* space: what is meaningful is not only what is present, but what is absent; not the note, but the pause; not the figure, but the void. This void is never a nihilistic nothingness—it is *ku* (emptiness), understood through Zen and Mahāyāna thought as a fecund, generative matrix. In this light, *MA* is not a neutral absence, but a creative interval—one that opens the possibility of ethical and ontological emergence.

Nishida Kitarō's (2015) concept of *basho* (place) articulates this further. For Nishida, the place of absolute nothingness (*zettai mu*) is the field wherein opposites are synthesized—not overcome, but held in relational tension. *MA* is this field, the pregnant silence between gesture and response, self and other, life and death. Nishitani Keiji (2016) extends this by describing emptiness as the horizon of existential authenticity—a relinquishing of egoic control into the rhythm of being. Contemporary philosopher Hitoshi Nagai (2017) links *MA* to temporal breaks that allow ethical reflection: the momentary suspension that resists automation and allows moral choice to emerge. Thus, *MA* becomes the very condition of ethical space-time—a liminal interval where the sacred and the ethical coincide.

3. *MA* as Rhythmic Temporality: Against the Violence of Chronos

Western modernity is governed by *chronos*—quantifiable, linear, progressive time. Yet this temporal regime underpins both capitalist acceleration and colonial domination, reducing lived life to metrics, outputs, and deadlines. In stark contrast, *MA* proposes an alternative temporality: cyclical, rhythmic, embodied. Rooted in Buddhist practice (Zazen, breath meditation), *MA*-time is not about what happens next, but how one dwells in the now. Shizuteru Ueda (2018) describes this as “pregnant emptiness,” where temporality is not measured but lived—an unfolding rhythm that integrates stillness and motion, anticipation and recollection, presence and transformation.

Masahiro Morioka (2019) articulates this further in his notion of the “time of life”—a temporality that resists measurement and instead privileges ethical intimacy with the moment. In a world driven by speed, *MA* introduces the ethics of slowness. This has radical implications for digital culture, where time is compressed, optimized, and commodified. *MA* resists this by honouring sacred pauses: between keystrokes, between algorithmic operations, between data points. Temporality itself becomes an ethical medium: the manner of relation determines its moral quality. In the age of AI and quantum computing, *MA* offers a counter-temporal technique—a practice of attending to the in-between, to what resists quantification but is essential for meaning.

4. Beyond the Individual: The Relational Subject and Technological Becoming in Japanese Thought and the Post-European Turn

In advancing a philosophy of innovation that transcends Western ontological binaries, it is essential to explore the contributions of Japanese thinkers such as Watsuji Tetsurō, Yasuo Yuasa, and contemporary philosophers including Hiroshi Yamaguchi and Yuk Hui. These thinkers open alternative pathways to conceptualizing being, relation, and technology—crucial dimensions of post-dualist innovation theory.

Watsuji Tetsurō's seminal notion of *fūdo* (風土)—commonly translated as “climate and culture”—proposes a relational ontology where human existence (*ningen sonzai*) is always situated within an intersubjective milieu shaped by geographic, historical, and cultural forces (Watsuji, 1961; 1996). He introduces the concept of *aidagara* (間柄), or “betweenness,” to emphasize that individuals are not isolated beings but are constituted through dynamic relations with others and with nature. This stands in stark contrast to Cartesian dualism and underscores an ecological and ethical model of subjectivity that can inform new paradigms of innovation.

Yuasa (1993, 2009), drawing from Zen, Confucianism, and traditional medicine, deepens this relational understanding by focusing on the body as a site of cultivation. He argues that the unity of

mind and body is not given but achieved through disciplined practices that harmonize ki-energy (気), bodily awareness, and consciousness. This suggests that innovation is not merely cognitive or externalized in tools but is embodied, cultivated, and relationally emergent. Yuasa's emphasis on self-cultivation resonates with contemporary cognitive science and phenomenology, opening bridges between Eastern embodied philosophy and post-cognitivist views of mind.

Contemporary Japanese philosopher Hiroshi Yamaguchi (2020, 2024) builds on Watsuji and Yuasa to propose a relational ethics of technology grounded in care and interdependence. Yamaguchi critiques Western instrumental rationality and instead suggests that technologies must be evaluated based on their capacity to preserve and enhance relational fields (such as *ma*, the space between) and communal well-being. He brings attention to the ethics of inter-being, calling for a *cosmotechanical ethics* that harmonizes technological development with local ontologies and cultural sensitivities.

Yuk Hui (2016, 2019, 2021) extends these insights globally by proposing the notion of cosmotechnics—the idea that every culture has its own way of integrating the cosmos and technical activity. In contrast to the universalizing tendencies of Western technoscience, Hui argues for a plurality of technological ontologies rooted in diverse metaphysical traditions. His work resonates with Watsuji's *fūdo*, proposing that technology is not neutral or global but is always situated, cosmologically oriented, and ontologically plural (Hui, 2016). Hui's call for *technodiversity* aligns with efforts to decolonize innovation and recognizes the need for alternative epistemic models that do not rely on Western techno-rationality.

Together, these thinkers suggest that innovation must be understood as relational, embodied, ethical, and cosmologically situated. Their philosophies challenge the individualistic, object-oriented, and extractive models of Western modernity and offer an alternative framework where innovation emerges from the interstices of body, environment, culture, and care. The future of innovation lies not in acceleration for its own sake, but in a deeply situated, plural, and life-affirming process that acknowledges our inter-being and cosmic entanglements.

5. Posthuman MA: Technology, Relational Ontology, and Society 5.0

Technological ethics, particularly in AI and robotics, are often framed by anthropocentric assumptions—human utility, control, and centrality (Moleka, 2025a). Yet Japanese robotics has evolved differently, drawing from cultural traditions that do not sharply separate humans from nonhumans. Hiroki Azuma (2020) and Kazuki Fujitaka (2023) show how Japanese posthumanism, informed by animism and relational ontology, envisions human-machine interaction not as command but communion.

In this view, *MA* becomes the interface—the interval that makes ethical co-existence possible. It resists binary subject-object divisions and allows for a field of mutual emergence. Machines are not Other; they are part of the co-becoming world. Kosuke Shimizu (2022) advocates for a “post-Western international relations” that embodies these principles—where *MA* functions as a diplomatic topology, hosting multiplicity without assimilation. As Japan advances toward Society 5.0—a vision of a human-centered super-intelligent society (Moleka, 2025a)—*MA* serves as its ethical compass, ensuring that the integration of AI, IoT, and biotechnology occurs in alignment with reverence for the interstitial, the sacred pause, and the relational field.

6. Ecological and Spiritual Resonances: MA as Planetary Attunement

Ecological philosophy in Japan, informed by Shinto and Buddhist cosmologies, foregrounds relational embeddedness. Nature is not a resource but a network of sacred presences (*kami*), each participating in a cosmic rhythm. Augustin Berque (2019) and Nakamura Yuko (2020) emphasize how traditional Japanese landscaping (e.g., *satoyama*) embodies this attunement—co-creating space in dialogue with seasonal rhythms, elemental flows, and spiritual resonance.

MA thus becomes not a human imposition but a natural rhythm—a sacred cosmogram that organizes human dwelling in alignment with ecological cycles. This ethos has implications for

planetary ethics. In place of geoengineering and technocratic control, *MA* suggests an ethics of reverent participation: listening to the silences of rivers, pausing with trees, acting in synchrony with the breath of earth. Morioka (2021) connects this to a philosophy of death—not as finality but as continuation in relational fields. Mourning becomes attunement; remembrance becomes ethical time. *MA* reveals that the sacred is not elsewhere but between: in the leaf's fall, in the breath's return, in the unspoken bond across generations.

7. Transcultural Constellations: *MA* and the Pluriversal Horizon

While grounded in Japanese cosmology, *MA* echoes relational ontologies worldwide. Its ethical resonance with African Ubuntu—"I am because we are"—is profound (Moleka, 2025b). Both prioritize inter-being, humility, and ethical presence. Indigenous cosmologies across the Americas, Oceania, and Africa similarly recognize the sacredness of relational intervals. New materialist thinkers such as Karen Barad (2007) propose a similar shift: from discrete entities to entangled phenomena, from agency as possession to intra-action.

Arturo Escobar (2018) calls for a *pluriverse*: a world of many worlds. *MA* can serve as a philosophical hinge for such a vision—a subtle ethics of engagement that privileges listening, spacing, and mutual emergence. In this, ethics becomes aesthetic; politics becomes poetics; relation becomes revolution. *MA* invites a slow, sacred, and deeply attuned reworlding—a planetary ethic rooted not in dominance but in the quiet power of the in-between.

Conclusion

In an age marked by ontological rupture, technological acceleration, and ecological unravelling, the Japanese philosophical notion of *MA* emerges as a quietly radical guidepost—a sacred compass for reorienting relational life. Far from being a mere spatial interval, *MA* reveals itself as an onto-poetic and ethical force: a generative topology where time, being, and becoming co-arise in attuned interdependence. Across its aesthetic, metaphysical, technological, and ecological dimensions, *MA* challenges the dominance of linear temporality, mechanistic subjectivity, and extractive logics. Instead, it affirms a rhythmic, co-becoming world sustained through pauses, resonances, and the dignity of the in-between.

By situating *MA* in dialogue with Ubuntu, Indigenous cosmologies, feminist new materialisms, and posthuman design, this essay has proposed *MA* as more than a culturally specific idea—it is a pluriversal principle of ethical relationality, one that bridges sacred immanence and planetary futures. In this view, to dwell in *MA* is to participate in a more-than-human covenant of care, presence, and mutual becoming. It is to affirm silence as wisdom, pause as resistance, and co-presence as sacred ground.

Ultimately, *MA* does not prescribe a system but invites a sensibility—a way of being that listens deeply to the world's intervals. In this listening lies a quiet revolution: a post-anthropocentric ethic capable of healing the fractures of modernity and guiding us toward a more reverent, relational, and rhythmically attuned world.

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