

The Ternary Object: on Shinichiro Kurimoto's Theory of Levels

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ABSTRACT

This brief article has two objectives. First, it aims to provide a concise and lucid elucidation of Theory of Levels, an ontological system which the veteran Japanese thinker Shinichiro Kurimoto first invented in the early 1980s and has ever refined through the course of his decades-long career. Second, it intends to demonstrate with cogency that the discourse, albeit having been buried in oblivion for quite a while, carries a potential to help one to obtain a new perspective from which to freshly and positively interpret the existential dilemma between our natural sense that each one of us is a unique existence and the sheer reality that every one of us is merely a trivial strand of diverse larger structures.

*In order to achieve the objects, the argumentation proceeds in the following order. Taking a survey of the papers in which Kurimoto's Theory of Levels makes an appearance, the initial part confirms that, though it is not the case that all academicians have completely disregarded the theory, as yet none of them has conducted a sufficiently comprehensive dissection thereof. Consulting, or rather reconstructing Kurimoto's laconic account in his 2013 booklet entitled *The Last Lecture of Shinichiro Kurimoto*, the second part clarifies that the theoretical singularity of Theory of Levels consists in that it enables one to deem an existence to be a ternary object and thereby to get over the apparently insuperable quandary mentioned above. The third part concludes the discussion by indicating that decades after Kurimoto some researchers in natural science come to discuss from their own scientific perspective some views that hold a quite high degree of intimacy with Kurimoto's theory. The authors of this paper are fully convinced that the Theory of Levels and/or fields upheld by the researchers*

Mentioned in this paper are worth academic efforts to be scrutinized to close in on the ontological essence of mankind and every other existence alike.

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1. Introduction

In so far as we can infer from the existing publications, it would not be far off the mark for us to state that Shinichiro Kurimoto is, along with such illustrious personages as Hitoshi Imamura, Yujiro Nakamura, Keizaburo Maruyama, and Kojin Karatani, one of the most distinguished thinkers who had been active during the fourth quarter of the last century (Kosaka et al., 1990; Nakamasa, 2006). As early as 1980, Kurimoto, as an economic anthropologist, had already gained a certain amount of celebrity in academic spheres with *Economy as Illusion*, and his 1981 masterpiece *The Monkey Wearing Underpants* made him a household name¹. By making a casual search on the Internet, one can facily know that, even today, he has on no account been forgotten (see Ishii, 2017; Sakuma, 2019).

However, in spite of the widespread and durable publicity that Kurimoto has enjoyed heretofore, it is in no way widely known that, throughout his long career spanning more than three decades from the late 1970s to the early 2010s, the scholar has developed a unique ontological system which he has denominated "Theory of Levels", and, indeed, the primal motive that has goaded us to write the present paper is that we have judged it to be grossly injudicious for us to let the theory sink into sheer oblivion without properly gauging its possibilities. To express it in more straightforward parlance,

the basal objective of this article is to persuasively indicate that Kurimoto's Theory of Levels deserves much more heed than it has caught to date.

Needless to say, it is not the case that his compatriots have completely disregarded the discourse. If one checks over online databases, one can instantly spot several essays in which it receives a mention, such as the recent studies done by Mitsui (2016) and Ise (2002). But, on the other hand, it is an undoubted fact that there has been no study that deals with the theory as its cardinal subject.

Allowing for these circumstances, we have written this monograph with the two following objectives in mind. We aim, first, to supply a succinct and intelligible exposition of Kurimoto's Theory of Levels, and, second, to cogently show that the theory has a considerable potential to help us to get a novel viewpoint on which to positively reinterpret the existential dilemma between our natural feeling that each one of us is an individual existence and the downright reality that every one of us is just a trivial strand of diverse larger structures.

In order to achieve them, the discussion develops in the following order. Consulting, or rather restructuring Kurimoto's economical account in his booklet entitled *The Last Lecture of Shinichiro Kurimoto*, the next part brings forward a recapitulation of Theory of Levels, and then clarifies that its theoretical singularity consists in that it enables one to deem every existence to be a ternary object and thereby to get over the ostensibly insuperable quandary mentioned above. Thereupon, the last part concludes the discussion by indicating the fact that, unlike Kurimoto whose academic struggles are primarily of human and/or social science's nature, some researchers in natural science as well are starting to advocate the similar perspectives to his, convinced that every existence alike in the world we reside has ternary nature, which, in the course of our future study, has yet to be ontologically made more apprehensible.

2. Theory of Levels: The Ternary Object

Although Kurimoto has neither disclosed the exact time at which he came up with Theory of Levels nor left a palpable clue whereby we can surmise it, we can affirm with much confidence that the 1980s was the period during which the Japanese thinker had honed his philosophical prowess and polished the ontological theory with the most intense ardor. In many of his books, essays, interviews, and dialogues that were made public in the spell, one can find a variety of explanatory accounts thereof (see, for example, Kurimoto, 1982; Kurimoto and Kosaka, 1985; Kurimoto and Maruyama, 1986).

Among those works, *The Monkey Wearing Underpants* and *Meaning and Life* signalize themselves and should be touched upon before we purvey our elucidation of the theory. That is because the former, which has been undoubtedly the most popular and influential volume of Kurimoto's copious oeuvres, is the work in which he presented Theory of Levels for the first time as his own ontological system and because the latter is his sole book-length opus throughout which it is treated as the central topic.

Yet, in our estimation, none of the pieces can be regarded as an appropriate text by which one can be acquainted with the theory, for the depiction in the seventh chapter of *The Monkey Wearing Underpants* is made in rather crude terms, and the argumentative procedure of *Meaning and Life* is not only excessively convoluted but also contains a couple of the arguments that appear logically inharmonious with each other.

Therefore, in this part, we do not turn to these works to spell out part and parcel of Theory of Levels. In lieu, below we draw exclusively on *The Last Lecture of Shinichiro Kurimoto*, which, as its title evidently suggests, Kurimoto wrote in the evening of his career. Admittedly, its laconic explanation of the theory is by no means perfectly free from incoherence or repugnancy; still, it is morally sure that the work is, at least, the best material available for us.

Now that the necessary preparations have been completed, let us begin to conduct a theoretical examination into Kurimoto's Theory of Levels itself by consulting and construing the terse description in *The Last Lecture*, which came out in the year of 2013. In light of the first objective which we have set forth in the previous part, it would behoove us to directly cut to the chase. In a nutshell, it is an ontological theory that conceives of an existence as a *ternary* object. The following

passage, crisp as it may seem, expresses the basic tenets there of: Roused by Michael Polanyi's theory of life, I have propounded, or explicated what I have dubbed Theory of Levels. According to it, an existence consists of manifold *levels* [emphasis added], and the most fundamental level is the somatic one that is made up purely of physical and chemical materials. (Kurimoto, 2013, pp. 15-16)

It goes without saying that what Kurimoto here tags as "an existence", which contains multitudinous levels, must be deemed as a level, too, in that there is no doubt that it, as a level, composes other existences. Although a few might assume it to be too simple, this triplex condition of being is what the proposition that an existence is a *ternary* object means.

For caution's sake, it would be wise of us to emphasize that one should not put down the theory as an artless but popular view which claims that only relations are real. Subsequent to these sentences, he observes that one can equate a level with a "body" or a "form", maintains that each single one of the levels is "demarcated" and "controlled" by a set of "governing principles" that is peculiar to it, and then labels the mechanism through which a body emerges as a distinct level regulated by a certain assemblage of theorems as the "Boundary Control" (Kurimoto, p. 18).

Though we suppose that not a handful may have already fathomed out the atypical potency of this theory, it would be advisable for us to keep on explaining a bit more. What is worthy of special note is that he then firmly proclaims that even what would usually be marked down as only a *notional* entity like an aggregation of individuals as well as those particles that are theoretically thought as most elementary must be looked on as a level, and avouches that, as with what we ordinarily qualify as a real and actual entity, every one of them also operates according to an array of laws specific to it (Kurimoto, 2013, p. 19). Although his delineation in the text carries on a little further (see Kurimoto, 2013, pp. 19-20), we guarantee that one can consider these points to be the pith and marrow of Theory of Levels.

Supposedly, upon their first reading, those who are highly conversant with the work and ideas of Michael Polanyi would be disposed to blithely dismiss Kurimoto's discourse as just a bland rehash or an inferior replication of what the Hungarian philosopher had discussed in many of his texts, and we readily admit that the suspicion is right to a certain extent (see, for example, Polanyi, 1968).

Nonetheless, one ought to be mindful of a decisive dissimilarity which rigidly stands between them, inasmuch as what makes his Theory of Levels worthy to be revisited lies in the deviation. Let us bethink ourselves that Polanyi (1968) is of the opinion that the highest level is *life*, that is, a living organism, whether it is a simple bag, a trout, or a human being. To paraphrase with a famous and astute concept that the French Marxist Louis Althusser (1965) often employed, Polanyi adjudged biological life to be "the last instance".

Meanwhile, as we have remarked, the Japanese thinker reckons even a *conceptual* object as a level that comports itself as per a series of codes particular to it, observing that "one can never understand a society" without presuming it to be a level (Kurimoto, 2013, p. 20). Here no one would fail to notice the theoretical update which Kurimoto adds to Polanyi's moderate thesis. Simply put, what is unique with Kurimoto's position is that it posits that everything that one can view as an existence is a *ternary* object in the sense that it is formed by myriad levels, is itself a distinct level, and constitutes one of the levels that shape other levels.

Since we estimate that the foregoing account has carried out the first object of this paper, we should move on to handling the remaining one: how would the theory capacitate one to conquer the aporia between one's usual impression that one is a sole existence and the solid actuality that one is just an element of numerous bigger fabrics?

In essence, it does so by encouraging one to see literally every existence as a level. To describe it with more perspicuity, Theory of Levels empowers one to break the impasse by granting one a soundly consistent framework which, on the one hand, renders the ontological status of all existences equal, and, on the other hand, does not reduce the singularity of each existence to either a part or a totality. Let us rephrase once more. To the extent that any of the levels cannot claim superiority over another, the three dimensions of being—consisting of various levels, being a singular level, and forming other levels—are entirely on a par in ontological terms; hence, once one genuinely adopts this into one's

mindset, the existential dilemma between one's belief in one's singularity and the reality that it is a trivial being would gradually diminish and, in due course, slide into dissolution.

3. Conclusion:

What we have reasoned in the preceding section is that, to paraphrase, Theory of Levels posits that singularity, totality and relationality are the three features that conflictingly but simultaneously reside in every existence. Before wrapping up our argumentation, it will be of some use to inquire into another discourse that holds a certain degree of similarity with Theory of Levels in the hope that it would both fortify Kurimoto's theory and make it more apprehensible.

Ryoichi Obitsu (2020), a Doctor of Medicine, theorizes that the natural world comprises variety of layers of *field*. He uses the term *field* almost synonymously with Kurimoto's *level*. Commencing from the human level, it goes upward to family/workplace, community, the natural environment, the state, the globe, the universe and to emptiness. Downward we see organs, cells, genes, molecules, atoms, and elementary particles in order. Recognition of these fields extending both ways from our human field might explain the ternary nature every existence on each field possesses. While Kurimoto and Obitsu seem to share similar perspectives, unlike Kurimoto, whose academic struggle is mainly of philosophical nature, the insight of Obitsu holds more practical implication. Below we attempt for the conclusionary purpose to integrate both to facilitate the apprehension of what they both imply by the key terms repeatedly mentioned so far.

The level of individuality in the field of human seems to be a good point to ignite the discussion with because no one would argue against existence of individual persons. We take it for granted that a single individual has, by definition, its own singularity, in other words, a bunch of features that distinguish it from others. Put it differently, where there is an existence, singularity is always there. Albeit people seem to be composed of the identical components or elements, a person as an aggregation of those components come to assume different features from those of others. Our discussion branches at this point into two.

First, people seem to be scarcely recognizing that the same singularity exists on the lower level, which means that, for instance, each one of our physical components has its own singularity. Take a stem cell as an instance. A biological experimentation by a monocular biologist revealed that a single animal stem cell secluded from others did not differentiate into having any function, and when put back into the lump of other cells it resumes taking on a certain function (Fukuoka, 2009, pp. 97-98). The fact reveals that where there are others of the same kind in the same field, one comes to assume its own part of function. The function which a single cell assumes, for the purpose of this paper, can be called *individuality* or *singularity*. This fact means that the presence of others in the same field makes one to assume its own individuality and grant a degree of unique feature to it. The fact applies ontologically to each level and/or field. Regardless of the level, every single existence is a unique phenomenon. The statement of Obitsu that the objects on the upper field subsume the characteristics which those on the lower possess seems to best support that human beings are no exception. The field of human, which people naturally regard as having a place above the cell field, inevitably possesses the same nature. In the absence of other human beings in this whole world, no one would be able to have definite identity about who and what he/she is. Each level holds its own logic of granting unique characteristics to individual existence within the field.

Secondly, where there is a group of those unique individuals, chemistry, or chemical reactions, inevitably accrue. Every existence has as its nature intrinsic disposition. Where two different dispositions meet, reactions always result, which is usually referred to as relationship. And we should never overlook the fact that the relationship born is also intrinsic between them. In short, where two intrinsic dispositions meet, their relationship is also intrinsic. In the human field, this intrinsic relation is what is known as compatibility, or chemistry. It is important to note that people are likely to overlook the fact that not only human but all substances in this world, whether organic or not, has its own intrinsic dispositions so long as they are individuals having unique individuality. This, according to our apprehension, is the third ontological nature which Kurimoto meant, citing *Ghost in the Machine* by Arthur Koestler; things produced with seemingly the same components and through the same process of manufacturing and/or formulation can sometimes start functioning in the way no one expects. It may be that we can anticipate a certain degree of compatibility when two different dispositions

meet, yet no one could be a hundred percent certain about the final outcome. The components we regard of having the same nature are not necessarily the same; they have individuality. These explain what we construe out of Kurimoto's theory of levels as relationality.

Hitherto, the authors have come to safely assume that an existence can be regarded as a ternary object, i.e., as a single level, as a component of another level, and as a totality of diverse level, and that the Kurimoto's work is a pioneering sort in shedding light on each level which can be a subject of further construal, regardless of the field of science; natural, social or human, from the perspective of relationality.

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