

## FREEDOM AND EQUALITY FOR THE SAKE OF NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE?

### The Liberalism of Fukuzawa Yukichi and its Shortcomings

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**Abstract** Fukuzawa Yukichi is considered to be one of the most important Japanese philosophers during the Meiji period (1868-1912) who is known for his strong advocacy of liberal values such as freedom and equality. His plea contained the political demands of liberalising Japanese society and reforming its strict social hierarchy. However, within the logical structure of Fukuzawa's argument, these principles only assume an instrumental value in which they are conceived as a means to secure Japan's national independence, which ultimately weakens his endorsement of liberalism. The case of Fukuzawa Yukichi thereby constitutes a particularly important example of how the instrumental approach towards liberal rights by philosophers in Meiji Japan undermined the liberal movement itself and contributed to its own decline and the corresponding rise of nationalism.

*Keywords: Liberalism, Nationalism, Fukuzawa Yukichi, Meiji Japan, Japanese philosophy*

## I Introduction

Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901) is commonly regarded as one of the most significant Japanese intellectuals of the Meiji period (1868–1912). This era of Japanese history was characterised by substantial political, technological, economic, and social transformations following the Meiji Restoration of 1868 that returned political power to the emperor. Moreover, the period is generally perceived as the start of the modern history of Japan. This constituted the end of the political supremacy of the Shogunate who had ruled the country for more than 250 years within a rigid hierarchical feudalistic social system. Furthermore, it ended the national policy of seclusion (*sakoku*) that banned almost all foreign trade and isolated Japan during Shogunate rule. The social changes and political turmoil during the beginnings of the Meiji period were therefore also largely associated with the influx of foreign, in particular Western, philosophical and political ideas (Beasley, 1972).

Fukuzawa is particularly praised for his strong argument to modernise Japanese society based on the institutionalisation of liberal and egalitarian political values including, for example, the introduction of basic liberal rights, the recognition of the formal equality of citizens, and public education. In the following, I discuss his central argument for these improvements to Meiji Japanese society, which is stated in one of his most important works, *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization* (1875; hereinafter: *Outline*). In *Outline*, Fukuzawa constructs a robust argument in support of his own understanding of civilisation and its political implications and directly attacks several competing ideological currents of the time, such as Confucianism and Japanese National Learning (*kokugaku*). Within this argument, his demanded liberal changes to Japanese society are conceptualised as a requirement for the defence of its national independence to ensure the continued existence of the Japanese cultural and political identity.

*Outline* thereby reflects Fukuzawa's pragmatic stance, which at first glance seems to support the persuasiveness of his argument in the historic context of the early Meiji period. However, the logical subordination of liberal values as a means for the goal of national independence ultimately harms his own endorsement of liberalism through several logical problems it introduces. My critique thus does not assess Fukuzawa's demand for liberalisation based upon political arguments stemming from contrasting positions, but instead focuses exclusively on the logical structure of the argument characterising *Outline* that displays an exclusively instrumental approach towards liberal rights. To demonstrate the inconsistencies within Fukuzawa's thought that are produced by this instrumental reasoning I also occasionally draw on another seminal work of his, namely *An Encouragement of Learning* (1872).

This tendency of Fukuzawa to undermine his own liberalism that I aim to illustrate is reflective of liberal political philosophy in Imperial Japan on a broader scale. My discussion of Fukuzawa's thought thereby also seeks to support the study of this era of Japanese history and the different subsequent intellectual and political developments. While this paper focuses on a philosophical analysis of Fukuzawa's political ideas, my central claims about the logical flaws of his liberalism also provide important implications for the historical and political analyses of the liberal movement and other Western-inspired ideological currents within Meiji-era and post-Meiji-era Japanese society.

These internal weaknesses of Meiji liberalism that are the consequence of its instrumental reasoning, which are reflected in its most important representative, Fukuzawa Yukichi, strongly contributed to its downfall and the corresponding popularisation of nationalist and illiberal ideologies. These in turn facilitated the later development of the ultranationalist dictatorial Japanese state and its imperialist policies prior to and during the Second World War (Hane, 1963). A comprehensive understanding of these aspects is, therefore, best achieved within an interdisciplinary framework combining philosophy, history, and politics, to which this paper aims to contribute.

## 2 Fukuzawa Yukichi's Plea for Civilization and Liberalisation

In *Outline*, Fukuzawa strongly advocates for the transformation of Japanese society towards modernisation and an enhancement of both personal and public freedoms. His demands for social and institutional modifications thus reflect strong liberal claims. For example, he argues that the dignity or authority of public officials must only be the consequence of their representative function and the value of the law (2013, p. 7). This assertion strongly contradicts both the assumed natural superiority of the imperial family and the emperor asserted by National Learning (*kokugaku*) scholars, as well as the conception of a particular kind of morality that is supposedly required for legitimate rulers that was demanded by Confucianists at the time.

Similarly, he regards social hierarchies as merely the product of human society and strongly criticises their attempted naturalisation. In particular, equality and freedom are considered highly valuable by Fukuzawa, who asserts that "all men are inherently equal. This is the most important principle of human society." (2013, p. 16). The institutionalisation of freedom, in turn, relies on the existence of diversity and the potential of open public discussion, since "the spirit of freedom can only exist in the atmosphere of diversity of ideas" (1973, p. 21).

This spirit of freedom plays a crucial role, as the improvement of Japanese civilisation supposedly cannot be achieved by merely copying certain elements of Western societies such as their technology. For Fukuzawa, this would only correspond to what he calls the 'exterior elements of civilisation'. Instead, substantial modernisation necessitates the cultivation of the 'spirit of civilisation', i.e. its interior elements. By this, he refers to a new way of thought and structuring of social relations based upon liberal principles, in particular freedom and equality. Merely adopting Western technology within the existing social structures would not effectively contribute towards the long-term, stable development of Japan but only the short-term, unsustainable advancements of its civilisation (1973, pp. 16ff; p. 28).

Civilisation itself is conceptualised teleologically, i.e. as striving towards the abstract goal of a seemingly perfect, fully developed human society. However, Fukuzawa regards this ultimate end as either unachievable or lying far in the distant future, as even the most advanced civilisations of the Western nations are allegedly still far from this outlined "goal of all human endeavors" (1973, p. 35). Additionally, the comparative advantage of Western civilisations compared to Meiji Japan is only regarded as the result of contingent historical developments and not essential characteristics of either entity. Therefore, Japan, which he regards as semi-developed, can 'catch up' to the West by leaving the political ideology of feudalism and its rigid social hierarchy in the past. Civilisation is hence a relative term to be employed for the comparison of different societies, which is itself a universal aspect of humanity (p. 13).

Furthermore, his advocated progression of Japanese civilisation and the central role that freedom and equality ought to play within it thus clearly illustrates the liberal and considerably pro-democratic position Fukuzawa adopts. Civilisation, as he conceptualises it, requires an institutionalised plurality of opinions in the public sphere, which in turn implies the necessity to establish certain essential freedoms, such as the freedom of opinion and religion. Additionally, he regards the imbalance of power that according to him characterised Japanese history until the Meiji period, which is represented by the feudalistic system during Shogunate rule, as the main reason for Japan's lower level of civilisation compared to the Western nations (1973, p. 136). The development of Japanese civilisation thereby needs to be primarily built upon the values of freedom and equality, which are expressed in the establishment of basic individual rights and the liberalisation of its social structures.

Fukuzawa thereby develops a far-reaching argument in favour of civilisation which implies the modernisation and liberalisation of Japanese society after the end of the policy of national seclusion. However, within the logical structure of

the argument he delineates in *Outline*, this plea for civilisation is itself logically integrated as a means for achieving a more immediate goal, namely national independence. This is in turn required to preserve Japanese national polity or essence (*kokutai*). Fukuzawa's approach towards civilisation and its associated liberal principles is thus purely instrumental. Civilisation is valued not as an end in itself, but its value derives exclusively from its ability to serve as an instrument for obtaining another end, namely national independence. In the following section, I discuss the consequences of this instrumental approach toward civilisation and liberalism.

### 3 The Logical Problems of Fukuzawa's Instrumental Conception of Civilisation

The logical structure of the argument that Fukuzawa Yukichi develops in *Outline* contains three main premises that logically build upon one another. The primary end that Fukuzawa identifies is the preservation of the Japanese national polity. The existence of a national polity in turn, according to his conception of it, necessarily involves the political independence of the nation (1973, p. 23). National independence thus assumes a secondary position within the argument as a direct means that is required for the existence of national polity. The concept of civilisation, which implies the liberal transformation of Japanese society and its social and political institutions, assumes only a tertiary position within this structure.

The central claim of Fukuzawa and the reason for his endorsement of civilisation are found in the connection of the second and third premises. This takes place through the conceptualisation of modern civilisation as a necessary means for securing national independence. Therein, modernisation and liberalisation are presented as the only available instruments to achieve this. National independence itself is thus simultaneously an end regarding civilisation and a means regarding national polity. This logical structure that characterises *Outline* is also clearly expressed by Fukuzawa (1973) himself: "The only reason for making the people in our country today advance toward civilization is to preserve our country's independence. Therefore, our country's independence is the goal, and our people's civilization is the way to that goal" (p. 193). From a pragmatic standpoint, in light of the historical situation within Meiji Japan which was characterised by intellectual and political diversity and uncertainty, this logical subordination of liberal values under the goal of national independence might appear intuitively convincing at first. Fukuzawa's recognition of the importance of national independence is clearly informed by the imminent threat of Western imperialism, particularly the colonial

developments in India and China and the economic and political demands of the United States represented by Commodore Matthew Perry. Perry's demands practically forced Japan to end its policy of national seclusion and implement foreign trade relations (Beasley, 1972; see Fukuzawa, 1973, p. 186).

According to Hiruta (2022), Fukuzawa's strong concern for the nation could thus be interpreted as a result of this existential fear. Additionally, his focus on the goal of national independence appears to be a pragmatic choice to support the persuasiveness of his argument for the liberalisation of Japan within the intellectual context of Meiji society. By conceptualising civilisation as a means that is directly required to ensure the survival of the nation itself, his political demands become more significant (Paramore, 2020). Thereby, they might have also appeared as more convincing for conservatives or nationalists such as National Learning and Confucian thinkers who agree with the end Fukuzawa outlines but not his endorsement of liberalism. If Fukuzawa's argument that liberalisation is necessary for the advancement of civilisation, which in turn is the only effective means of ensuring national independence appears convincing, everyone that agrees with this end, i.e. national independence, also needs to endorse the means, i.e. societal changes based upon liberal values.

This logical structure however simultaneously constitutes the main weakness of Fukuzawa's argument for liberalism because of its instrumental character. In particular, the fundamental values of freedom and equality that Fukuzawa himself considers as essential human rights (2013, p. 13), are subordinated to a different end, which thereby disregards the essential value these principles have as ends in themselves. By conceptualising them as mere means for securing national independence, they are furthermore implicitly treated as contingencies. Since they are only considered for their instrumental value, they could simply be disregarded under different political circumstances, such as if other means of ensuring national independence are available or Japanese sovereignty would not be threatened in the first place. This implies that if Japanese national independence could be achieved by a different approach, liberalisation and the introduction of personal freedoms and equal rights would no longer be required or even deemed useful. Admittedly, Fukuzawa himself states that civilisation is the only effective means to achieve national independence (1973, pp. 193-195). This is, however, the consequence of the contingent historical circumstances he analyses instead of a recognition of the intrinsic values of liberal principles. This would instead require them to assume the role of an end instead of a means within the logical structure of *Outline*, which, as previously demonstrated, is not the case.

Now, while this critique might appear convincing as such, it could be dismissed as inappropriate or anachronistic if its underlying framework that consid-

ers liberal principles such as freedom and equality as ends containing an intrinsic value did not align with Fukuzawa's own reasoning. However, my utilisation of this position to critique Fukuzawa's argument is not arbitrarily chosen but based on the impression that Fukuzawa's own thought elsewhere contains a similar logic that in turn also implies the necessity of acknowledging the intrinsic value of freedom and equality. For example, he states in *An Encouragement of Learning* (1872):

*"We should associate with one another following the laws of heaven and humanity. Such an attitude, based on reason, implies acknowledging one's guilt even before the black slaves of Africa; but it also means standing on principle without fear of the warships of England and America."* (p. 6)

This quote from *An Encouragement of Learning*, published three years before *Outline*, illustrates a strong plea for reason and the defence of absolute principles that are here referred to as "laws of heaven and humanity" despite the threat of Western imperialism represented by the warships. This claim directly contradicts the previously discussed instrumentalization and logical subordination of the same principles that characterise the argument in *Outline*, which demonstrates internal inconsistencies within Fukuzawa's thought.

However, Fukuzawa's instrumental conceptualisation of civilisation produces a further logical paradox in addition to this first inconsistency. This is the result of Fukuzawa's distinction between Japan and Europe which is based on their seemingly different levels of civilisation. Civilisation is (logically) aimed at preserving Japan's national polity by way of ensuring its national independence. Yet, for Fukuzawa, Japan's national polity is itself conceptualised in contrast to the West and its level of civilisation (Sakamoto, 2001). This logically implies that a progression of Japanese civilisation until the level of the West would eliminate the difference between Japan and Europe and thereby implicitly also eliminate the Japanese national polity. If the means, i.e. civilisation, fulfils its goal, namely 'to catch up' with the West, it undermines the end for which it is itself instrumentalised.

This paradox, in addition to the previously discussed inconsistencies within Fukuzawa's reasoning, would be avoided if civilisation and its associated liberal values of freedom and equality would be considered as ends in themselves and not instrumental means for the ends of national independence and the preservation of Japanese national polity. It remains up to historical speculation to assess the potential different impact such a reformulation of Fukuzawa's thought would have had if it were advocated by him at the time. While Fukuzawa's instrumental approach might have pragmatically granted his argument additional persua-

sive power contra his intellectual opponents, such as Confucian and National Learning scholars, it ultimately weakened his own endorsement of liberalism.

Fukuzawa's argumentative prioritisation of national polity and independence instead of civilisation and liberalism hence constitutes one of the primary examples of an implicit nationalism that was already embedded within liberal thought and its associated political movements in Meiji Japan. According to Hane (1963), this embedded nationalism ultimately led to the liberal movement's own demise and thereby contributed to the later developments of ultranationalism and militarism within the Japanese Empire. Since national independence was regarded as the only immediately important goal for Japan, the advancement of individual rights had to be subordinated to national interests.

Thereby, even within Fukuzawa's thought itself, concerns for liberalism and civilisation were increasingly replaced by more nationalist ideas, which in turn also reinforced its growing influence (Craig, 1968). The case of Fukuzawa Yukichi thus exemplifies the eventually far-reaching consequences that an instrumental approach towards liberalism had in undermining the liberal movements' own merit and political importance in modern Japanese history. Consequently, it might therefore also present important lessons for different political contexts.

## 4 Conclusion

In *An Outline of a Theory of Civilization*, Fukuzawa Yukichi delineates one of the most prominent and influential pleas for developing Japanese civilisation and liberalism formulated during the Meiji period (1868-1912). However, his argument in favour of liberalising Japanese society is ultimately undermined by the logical structure in which it is embedded. Within this structure, central liberal values that are to be incorporated into Japanese social and political structures such as freedom and equality are conceptualised as a mere means for the defence of Japanese national independence, which in turn is required for the existence of the Japanese national polity.

The reasoning that is thereby introduced effectively diminishes the strength of Fukuzawa's own argument, as the value of the liberal principles he advocates is only considered with regard to their instrumental purpose instead of intrinsic importance. This, first, contradicts his own political thought reflected in his prior works such as *An Encouragement of Learning*. Second, it leads to further logical paradoxes that are produced by his teleological conceptualisation of civilisation and the different developmental levels of Western countries in comparison to Japan.

Consequently, the forcefulness of Fukuzawa's endorsement of liberalism is undermined by the logical structure of his argument. His case seems to be particularly representative of the internal problems within liberal political thought in modern Japanese history that were the consequence of its own embedded nationalism. The eventual downfall of liberalism in Imperial Japan and the corresponding rise of (ultra)nationalism can be at least partially attributed to these developments that are clearly reflected in the case of Fukuzawa. My outlined analytical approach focusing on the logical structure of Fukuzawa's political argument, therefore, appears to be relevant beyond its immediate implications regarding the study of Fukuzawa's philosophy. Primarily, it seeks to inform the historical and political study of the ideological developments regarding the decline of liberalism and the rise of nationalism in modern Japan, in particular during the Meiji period. This paper thereby contributes to the study of these political developments that are best conceived within an interdisciplinary framework in which philosophy, history, and politics are incorporated.

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