

2016 - Issue Two

Does Humanity Know *Nothing* At All?

MICHAEL CAMACHO

Masanobu Fukuoka, *The One-Straw Revolution: An Introduction to Natural Farming* (NYRB Classics, 2009).

The title of this book can be misleading. “Revolution” calls to mind an uprising, an overthrow, a call to action. But the author of this little treatise on “do-nothing” farming makes clear that what is needful today, in the face of unbarred activism and ceaseless striving for “progress,” is to “bring about a ‘movement’ not to bring anything about” (159).

This epitomizes in many ways the core of Masanobu Fukuoka’s thought, in all its paradox and, perhaps especially to us Western readers, all its apparent passivity: man’s task in this world is precisely *not to act*. This insight came to Fukuoka in a flash, following an acute illness as a young man that brought him near the brink of death. The 24 year old plant pathologist, trained in all the rigors of modern science, had spent his days laboring over microscopes and his nights “fooling around.” And then, all at once, he woke up. Like a second Siddhartha, he came to consciousness—literally and figuratively—beneath a tree, struck with the sudden realization that “all human understanding and effort are of no account” (4). The following 70+ years of his life spent as a farmer were merely an attempt, as he put it, “to give my thoughts a form,” to incarnate them in a life, and so to see if they were true. “All I have been doing, farming out here in the country, is trying to show that humanity knows nothing” (19).

Rather than dismiss this bizarre claim out of hand—humanity knows *nothing*? nothing at all?—we would do well first to try to understand it. Fukuoka’s insight begins to take on light when we situate it in terms of the center of things, as he understands it, which is not man but nature. “Nature” here is not simply the biological or the non-human—or perhaps, in the context of food and farming, the “non-processed” (the author has some pointed remarks on the way in which everyone is in favor of “natural food” today, without once stopping to ask what nature itself *is*). Nature, for Fukuoka, is “the unmoving and unchanging center,” “the non-moving point of origin,” “the source of things.” It bears a certain distant resemblance to T.S. Eliot’s “still point of the turning world.” To the extent that we human beings separate ourselves from nature (which, for Fukuoka, usually happens when we think we are closest to grasping it in thought), we spin off into darkness and ignorance. If, instead, we elect to abandon our “human will” and simply follow nature, allowing it to guide us rather than us trying to guide it, nature will respond by providing everything. “Serve nature and all is well. Farming used to be sacred work” (113).

A deep, almost unconscious religiosity and reverence run through Fukuoka’s work, and life. The author is, by his own confession, not particularly concerned to attach himself to any “religious group,” and at times certain tensions, if not outright contradictions, emerge in the underlying principles of his worldview. Still, on the whole, Fukuoka’s outlook seems fairly close to traditional Taoism, and Fukuoka

himself seems representative of an earnest, Eastern *homo religiosus*. Nature is eternal, not in time but in being. It precedes us, ontologically. All that we have comes forth from its hands. All that we do should be done in its light. Nature, in other words, is in some ways—speaking roughly, and passing over significant differences—identified with the one we call “God”: not as transcendent Creator (which makes a difference!), but as immanent principle operative in all things.

This is why, despite Fukuoka’s strident claims that man knows nothing—a polemic that would seem better directed against the piecemeal, instrumentalizing logic of the modern (scientific) intellect than against human knowledge as such—the whole of Fukuoka’s life and work is premised on *seeing* nature, on carefully attending to it, on striving to catch sight of the “natural pattern.” Likewise, his radical call for man to “do nothing” is in fact at root a call for man to *serve* nature, to live attuned to it, rather than to manipulate, impose and dominate it from without.

Fukuoka offers two recurring models of what it means to “do nothing.” First, there are the animals, for whom it is enough to eat, sleep and play. They inhabit a world of undivided reality, rather than the dividing—that is, abstracting and reducing—world of intellect. (The author differentiates the distinguishing and the non-distinguishing intellect, which are roughly comparable to *ratio* and *intellectus*, although with a negative and positive connotation, respectively. Perhaps a more apt analogy is Hegel’s *Verstand* and *Vernunft*.) Second, there are children, who “see without thinking, straight and clear” (25). They apprehend without trying to analyze or categorize. “Just playing or doing nothing, children are happy. A discriminating adult *decides* what will make him happy. He conditions his taste to what he thinks will taste good”—a cup of instant noodles from the vending machine, for example (137). “Originally,” however, “human beings had no purpose”—no purpose, that is, determined by volitional choice or striving. “Now, dreaming up some purpose or other, they struggle trying to find the meaning of life.” But this is the wrong question. “You would do well to ask the children whether or not a life without purpose is meaningless” (163).

If I have devoted so much space to Fukuoka’s fundamental worldview, this is precisely because it is so fundamental. Without understanding this, one cannot really understand what he means by “natural farming.” It won’t do, in other words, simply to leave to one side the author’s “philosophical-religious” views, as curious but ultimately unimportant, in order to focus on the “concrete” and “practical” effects he had on food and farming. This would be to miss entirely the point of his “revolution.” No: anything he did, and any wider effect he had, flows from, and is internally informed by, his principles.

It is not surprising that farming, for Fukuoka, is not in the first place a matter of technique, but of outlook or philosophy. What does it mean to farm? What makes farming natural? What is man’s proper place vis-à-vis nature? It is part of the inner *telos* of farming to try to answer such questions, by learning to see the world rightly. “The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings”—human beings, that is, who know their place in nature and who see nature for what it is (119). It is entirely possible to make use of “natural farming” techniques while remaining stuck within a “distinguishing,” utilitarian mindset. “Unless people become natural people, there can be neither natural farming nor natural food” (147).

The principles of natural farming can be articulated easily enough. As Fukuoka puts it, the method he practices is more of a non-method: to shepherd nature in such a way that you allow nature itself to work. The point is to step back, to undo any damage or disorder caused by man, to restore nature to itself by stripping off unnecessary accretions. It is telling that the principles Fukuoka advocates all take a negative form: no cultivation of the soil, no chemical fertilizers, no weeding or herbicides, no dependence on chemicals.

Particularly striking, from a farming perspective, is the author's emphasis on not plowing or cultivating the land (a practice which, since the book was written some 40 years ago, has become common place, even in conventional farming in the United States). Farmers plow in order to prepare soil to receive the seed: to make sure the seed does not get eaten or washed away, to uproot weeds in order to make space for the plant-to-be, and to aerate the soil and work in plant matter present on the surface of the ground. But chance seeds which fall and sprout in a natural, non-cultivated field do not fall on plowed soil. In keeping with his vision of things, Fukuoka sought to farm in this way. He came to see, in fact, that plowing is not only unnecessary, but that it in fact *weakens* crops. In addition to creating extra work (which today means extra fuel and emissions), and in addition to the massive soil erosion that can result, plowing and tilling provide a kind of artificial environment of loosened topsoil for the young plant which does not help it to root well and deeply.

As Fukuoka sees it, the earth, if properly cared for and allowed to return to its natural state, can better cultivate itself than we can cultivate it, through the activity of microorganisms, worms, small animals, and the penetration of plant roots. Left to themselves—which means, significantly, not simply abandoned, but judiciously guided so as to achieve and maintain their proper balance—the plant and animal communities naturally present in any field will keep the soil healthy and fertile. Plowing and tilling disrupt these communities, as do, to a much greater extent, chemical herbicides and fertilizers.

Fukuoka's method is also notable for emphasizing the need to control weeds, rather than wholly eliminate them. He achieves this through the growth of companion ground cover, and by mulching the ground with last year's straw. Other plants are thus allowed to grow up together with the planted seeds. In addition to reducing pests, which are more likely to devastate a monocrop that stands alone in the field and makes of itself an easy target, the co-growing of various non-harvested plants provides natural nutrients to the planted crops (what Fukuoka calls "green manure"). The weeds and mulched straw also help hide newly sown seeds from being eaten by the birds.

How is it possible to avoid pests without the use of pesticides? Fukuoka noticed that many plants suffer disease and insect damage because they are already weak: either because their roots are not strong (due to "unnatural" plowing, as well as unnecessary irrigation on the part of the farmer, both of which cause shallow roots because the plant does not have to work as hard); or because the seed variety has been "improved" for greater yield, which often makes it less hardy; or because the seed is planted in an unsuitable climate or at the wrong time. Many other modern farming practices—the use of chemicals, the indiscriminate clearing of land—serve to wipe out pests' natural predators. The best way to prevent disease and insect damage is simply to grow the right vegetables at the right time in healthy soil.

Fukuoka sees our current dependence on insecticides, herbicides and fertilizers as an instance of a much larger pattern: we resort to "technological" solutions to problems that are themselves caused by our use of technology, or more generally, by our technological (controlling, abstract, "discriminating") mindset. The author compares this to a man who breaks the tiles of his own roof: the roof leaks, he gets wet, and sets about to fix a problem that he himself created. He gives the example of a Japanese engineer who, in response to high levels of pollution in Japan's in-land sea, proposed building an enormous pipeline in order to pump fresh water overland from the Pacific Ocean. Such an unthinking, reactionary response is based on far too narrow an understanding of what is wrong. "Until the modern faith in big technological solutions can be overturned, pollution will only get worse" (84).

In farming contexts, a technological mindset often goes hand-in-hand with a profit-centered, "agribusiness" approach. The governing criteria become efficiency and productivity—how much one can make, how cheaply and easily one can make it—rather than the concrete, well-defined good of the

food and field before you. “To be worried about making money, expanding, developing, growing cash crops and shipping them out is not the way of the farmer,” but the way of the manufacturer. “To be here, caring for a small field, in full possession of the freedom and plenitude of each day, every day—this must have been the original way of agriculture” (111–12).

It is no surprise that food that is “manufactured,” rather than grown, tastes poor. A chicken that never sees the light of day, raised in a confined environment with hundreds of other chickens (because it is “more efficient”), fed artificial, nutrient-enriched feed (because it makes the chicken “more productive”), will inevitably produce eggs inferior to those of a chicken allowed to forage freely, according to its own inner nature and instincts. A commercial chicken’s egg “is not a product of nature but a man-made synthetic in the shape of an egg,” just as commercial vegetables, increasingly grown in hothouses out of season in order to meet consumer demand, are nothing but “a watery chemical concoction of nitrogen, phosphorous, and potash, with a little help from the seed. And that is just how they taste” (94).

Food and farming are two sides of the same coin. If farmers grow foods out of season, or use a coloring agent, or apply artificial sweeteners or paraffin wax, this is in response to consumer’s preferences and buying habits. And the average eater today has truly become a consumer, just as the farmer has become a manufacturer. We no longer care—perhaps we no longer even *know*—what tastes good; we care about what is cheapest, and what looks best. We care for size, appearance, convenience, novelty and selection far more than we care for quality. This is what leads farmers to dye beef and salmon, to bleach and polish eggs, to pick tomatoes while they are green and apply ethylene gas to ripen them in transit. The overall driving factor, of course, at least in the United States, is price: Americans spend less money than any other country in the world on groceries and food eaten at home—on average, a mere 6.5% of total household expenses (in Japan today it is 13.5%, in France 13.6%, in Italy 14.2%).

The question of food brings us back to the question of culture, which is fundamentally the question of man’s place in the world. Is it really the case that man can know nothing and do nothing?

Does man have nothing to contribute to nature, nothing that would in the best sense “exceed” nature, not from without but from within? At root, this question is inseparable from the question of what nature itself is. If nature, as Fukuoka thinks, is “the all,” which properly and rightfully includes man within it, then it makes no sense to ask if man can “contribute” or “add” to nature: that is already to wrongly distinguish the two. Man has no special standing in himself. Insofar as he stands “beyond” nature, he has already alienated himself from it.

Still, and on Fukuoka’s own terms, the image of shepherding or cultivating can be helpful in thinking about what it means to farm, and so, in a more general sense, what it means to act—and what human action might “add” to nature. Human activity, understood as a “shepherding of being,” entails, first, seeing what is, and second, fostering what is. Fukuoka’s farm, in point of fact, is different from an unkept forest or field. A human intellect capable of receptively grasping the form of things can *aid* this form in a way that magnifies and furthers it beyond what it would be without the co-working of man. There is an element of simple *sophistication* in Fukuoka’s method: his precise timing of the sowings, his clever use of ground cover, his “random” applications of straw to the fields “every which way,” which, unlike a straight and precise application (which serves only to smother the crops, as he learned), insulates and provides compost while allowing new seedlings to sprout through. Just because this approach is free of machines and chemicals does not make it any less the fruit of human intellect—indeed, arguably it makes it more so. Similar to the methods of American farmer Joel Salatin, Fukuoka’s approach to farming is at once smart and simple. His solutions to the problems that confront

him stem from deep familiarity with the things before him, and from genuine *thinking* about things before he acts.

John Paul II is well known for his claim that “man is the way of the Church.” Fukuoka, on the basis of what is ultimately a reduction of man to man’s own reductive idea of knowledge as power, sees no such place for the human being: “It is generally thought that there is nothing more splendid than human intelligence, that human beings are creatures of special value, and that their creations and accomplishments ... are wondrous to behold. ... [My thought] was a denial of this” (405). In the face of modern anthropocentrism, Fukuoka proclaimed a nature-centrism that would seem scarcely reconcilable with the vision of the Catholic Church. Still, it’s clear that what Fukuoka was seeking was a true “return to nature,” which, given his understanding of the world, is not so far from a return to something like God. But, without pretending to resolve this difference, we are still left with the question as to which is true: anthropocentrism or theocentrism?

Joseph Ratzinger, in a commentary on Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes*, provides the key for thinking a way forward: the radical “anthropocentrism” of Christianity, he says, is and must be a radical Christocentrism, which is itself a radical theocentrism: “on the basis of Christ, [the Council] dares to present theology as anthropology, and only becomes radically theological by including man in discourse about God by way of Christ.”^[i] If the center (“head”) of man is Christ, the center of Christ, the Son, is God the Father (1 Cor 11:3). In the end, on a Catholic understanding, Christ, and every human person in him, offers himself and the world to the Father in a “cosmic liturgy” of praise. Paradoxically, the world, like Christ himself, has its center beyond itself.

For the Catholic, man is the priest of the world, the one who consciously *knows*, as Fukuoka puts it, that “human life is not sustained by its own power,” that “food is a gift of heaven. People do not create foods from nature; heaven bestows them” (143). Man is thus the one who alone in the world can fully receive the gifts of heaven. But heaven gives still more than this. On a Catholic understanding, God gives man himself a share in the exchange of gifts: not only to receive, but also to give, and to give back. Man has his own “self-standing” in the world, and so is not in any simple way reducible to nature, or to God. But this “distinction” need not be, contra Fukuoka, a “separation,” a spinning off from the center of things. Rather, it is the possibility of a real co-operation and co-working. Man works *with* nature. If, as Fukuoka says, the relationship between man and nature is like a marriage, then the fruit of their co-working rightly exceeds them both. But this is indeed to act, to “bring something about.” This is true creativity.

Michael Camacho is a doctoral student in theology at the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, writing on the Trinity as communio in the thought of Augustine and Richard St. Victor.

[i] Joseph Ratzinger, “The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 5, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder & Herder, 1969), 159.

Keep reading! Click [here](#) for a review of Catherine de Hueck Doherty’s *Apostolic Farming*.

