



Haruki Murakami and Philosophical Concepts

Edited by
Joseph Thomas Milburn

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“*Haruki Murakami and Philosophical Concepts* engages with the works of Murakami and philosophy in a way I believe will be useful in opening new interdisciplinary lines of discussion. This collection provides an impressive array of philosophic concepts and thinkers that will appeal to general and academic readers alike.”

—Gary Rees, Associate Professor, *Bemidji State University, Minnesota, USA.*

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Editor

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For Thippakone and Nina Grace

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Introduction

Joseph Thomas Milburn 

Haruki Murakami and Philosophical Concepts provides an interdisciplinary perspective on the work of the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami, with a particular focus on the conceptual material of his work. The project relates to the following questions: *Is there any philosophic material or concepts in the work of Haruki Murakami? If so, why are they important? Does philosophic engagement add anything to the Murakami research field? Equally, does Murakami's fiction present us with anything valuable for the field of philosophy?*

Since first reading Murakami, I have felt there is indeed “something” philosophically important in his work. Yet Murakami’s fiction does not present any clear philosophic points or systems. Therefore, trying to articulate this “something” can be a challenging task. In 2022, I edited a special issue on the work of Haruki Murakami for a journal of philosophy,¹ which brought many experts in the field together as well as a range of

¹Joseph Thomas Milburn. Ed. *In Statu Nascendi: Journal of Political Philosophy and International Relations* [Special Issue: The Work of Haruki Murakami]. Stuttgart: Ibidem Press, 2022.

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novel insights. However, this work still did not quite get to the heart of Murakami's *philosophic* value and still leaned towards more literary perspectives. This collection, then, is a response to this and amounts to a call for academics to help clarify what exactly this importance and value in Murakami is.

I am very grateful that this call was answered enthusiastically by leading academics working on Murakami from around the world. I am honoured that this collection includes diverse perspectives from experts in Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Literature, Japanese Studies and more. This is a testament to this “something” in Murakami's work which inspires such varied and deep engagements and which also provokes certain key, reoccurring themes. I will give a brief introduction here to the structure and content of this collection, which will begin to show how these themes help to answer the questions mentioned above.

Part I is the reflective section which presents an exciting and unique forum where academics share their views on how Murakami's work relates to Philosophy. We begin with *Matthew C. Strecher's*² “A Very Philosophical Murakami”, which introduces some of the central philosophical questions present throughout Murakami's work such as the role of the individual within the collective (“the System”), metaphysical spaces, the land of the dead and the soul. This is an excellent starting point as a chronological overview of Murakami's novels and how they map onto these questions is given. Strecher maintains ultimately that Murakami's philosophic worldview is constructed implicitly through his fiction. *Jonathan Dil's*³ “A Matter of Life and Death: The Philosophy of Haruki Murakami” considers *Norwegian Wood* in relation to Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, with reference to William James as well as to the aphoristic aspect of Murakami. Dil states that rather than an intellectual understanding, Murakami's fiction allows for a philosophy of the body through the reader following the protagonist's development as a kind of “initiation” into new

² Matthew Strecher is a leading figure in the field of Murakami studies, particularly in English-language scholarship. See further: Matthew Carl Strecher. *Dances with Sheep: The Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Center for Japanese Studies, 2002; Matthew Carl Strecher. *The Forbidden Worlds of Haruki Murakami*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

³ See further: Jonathan Dil. *Haruki Murakami and the Search for Self-Therapy: Stories from the Second Basement*. London: Bloomsbury, 2022.

ways of being. Dil also hints at a religious significance in Murakami.⁴ Rick Dolphijn's⁵ 'On Murakami's Unstable Walls' considers Murakami's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* as well as *Kafka on the Shore, 1Q84*, the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, and the writing of Franz Kafka. Murakami is understood to be a geographer and, it is argued, his most recent novel is in fact told from the perspective of the city which holds the narrative together. Dolphijn offers us a work of philosophy through Murakami, which is highly valuable to both fields. Midori Tanaka Atkins,⁶ in "Aesthetics of In-Between Chronotope in the Works of Haruki Murakami", also considers Murakami's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* in relation to Bakhtin's concept of chronotopes, particularly in connection to a Japanese notion of time and space articulated in the aesthetics of *ma*. Atkins' statement regarding the narrative realm as both real and imaginary, *the said and the unsaid fold into one*, may be productively analysed alongside Dolphijn's concept of the *fold* in the entire world. Tomoki Wakatsuki,⁷ in "Murakami and his cosmopolitan commitment in the era of Walls", considers Murakami's everyday cosmopolitanism in connection to "the System", with further reference to Murakami's newest novel. The image of the wall is presented both in terms of the pandemic and global events, and also to commitment to belonging and even metaphysical questions on reality and one's "will" in response to it.

Olaf Schiedges,⁸ in "Thoughts about Haruki Murakami, Running, and Writing", reflects on Murakami as a writer and as a runner. Schiedges forges a connection between Murakami's regular physical training and his literary production, with reference to the philosopher, Peter Sloterdijk.

⁴ See further: Jonathan Dil. "Oh My Kamisama! God in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki", *In Statu Nascendi: Journal of Political Philosophy and International Relations* [Special Issue: The Work of Haruki Murakami], 2022, pp. 3–27.

⁵ Dolphijn's philosophic project draws upon the work of Murakami, particularly his concept of "cracks". See further: Rick Dolphijn. *The Philosophy of Matter: A Meditation*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021.

⁶ For more on chronotopes, see Midori Tanaka Atkins. "Killing Commendatore Book Review: From *Boku* to *Watashi*, Healing on Canvas and in the Darkness of the Pit", *In Statu Nascendi*, 2022, pp. 215–221.

⁷ See further: Tomoki Wakatsuki. *The Haruki Phenomenon: Haruki Murakami as a Cosmopolitan Writer*. Singapore: Springer, 2020; Tomoki Wakatsuki and Matthew Carl Strecher. "Rebels With a Cause: A Cosmopolitan Examination of Haruki Murakami and Kazuo Ishiguro", *In Statu Nascendi*, 2022, pp. 28–43.

⁸ Schiedges also considers a spatial approach to Murakami: Olaf Schiedges. "A Spatial approach to the fictional world of Murakami Haruki", *In Statu Nascendi*, pp. 185–193.

Gitte Marianne Hansen⁹ considers Murakami's gender philosophy and portrayal of female characters in "Criticisms of Her – What Says He? Murakami's Gender Philosophy". Hansen maintains that it may not be as simple as stating that Murakami presents a patriarchal perspective on women and gender, especially if we consider Oshima from *Kafka on the Shore*, Aomame from *IQ84* and other short stories by Murakami with female narrators.¹⁰ P. L. Thomas¹¹ "Haruki Murakami's 7 Stories: 'It's quite easy to become Men Without Women'", also explores Murakami's gender philosophy with reference to Murakami's collection *Men Without Women* and in connection to, again, the writing of Kafka. Thomas recognises misogyny in Murakami's writing, but also a necessary representation of modern men who are suffering from loneliness and incompleteness. Robert Junqueira, in "Philosophical Studies on Murakami?", offers a perspective from a philosopher on how Murakami can relate to the field of philosophy in the development of an interdisciplinary "object" of study. Junqueira considers John of St Thomas (Poinsett) and how a semiotic reading of Murakami may be possible.

Ype De Boer's¹² "Past Colours, Past Boundaries, Past Psychology. Existential Liberation in the Fiction of Haruki Murakami" analyses Murakami characters' engagement with their past. De Boer argues that they not only confront this past, but protagonists liberate themselves from it. Exploring the theme of identity, psychoanalysis and neuroscience, De Boer maintains that Murakami novels move beyond the theoretical level and allow for personal development through an open encounter with existential problems, which can be linked productively to Dil's reflection. Further, Murakami's work relates to central metaphysical questions at the *boundaries of everything*. De Boer's insight on trauma in Murakami can be linked to *Evangelos Koumparoudis'* "Memory in Murakami's *Norwegian Wood* and *IQ84: A Phenomenological–Hermeneutic and Deconstructive*

⁹ See further: Gitte Marianne Hansen and Michael Tsang. Eds. *Murakami Haruki and Our Years of Pilgrimage*. London: Routledge, 2021.

¹⁰ Hansen also translated one such story which was previously unpublished in English, Kanō Kureta (1990), in: Ted Goossen and Motoyuki Shibata. Eds. *MONKEY: New Writing from Japan: Vol. 3: Crossings*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2023.

¹¹ See further: Matthew Carl Strecher and P. L. Thomas. Eds. *Haruki Murakami: Challenging Authors*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016.

¹² See further: Ype De Boer. "Ethics of a Split Existence: Murakami's *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* as a Poetico-Philosophical Experiment", *In Statu Nascendi*, 2022, pp. 67–90.

analysis”, which focuses on the theme of memory, identity and death, as well as how this relates to coping with others and reality, with reference to Ricoeur and Derrida. *Michael Tsang*¹³ presents a semiotic approach to Murakami as an “Empty Signifier” in “The Empty Signifier That is Murakami”, which means that this collection, for instance, does not refer to the actual, biographical Murakami but to something entirely different. Tsang also makes an important point evident in Murakami studies, especially as it becomes increasingly global and interdisciplinary, that there are in a sense two Murakamis: Murakami Haruki, as per the naming conventions in Japan and in Japanese research, and the Haruki Murakami of the West—the question, then, is whether we are referring to the same writer. *Constantine Sandis* completes the forum with his “No Special Significance: Murakami’s Semiotics of Love”, which offers a personal reflection drawing on Charles W. Morris’ concept of signification and significance, representing the theme of *being split into two* in Murakami’s work—between understanding and misunderstanding, life and death, reality and dreams.

Part II is the main articles section which begins with *Barry Stocker’s* “How Murakami Uses Philosophy: Aesthetics and Ethics; Consciousness and Action”. This piece exemplifies what this collection set out to accomplish as it presents a highly original analysis of Murakami’s work through such philosophic themes as tragedy, irony, pan-psychism and aesthetics, among others, with reference to Hegel, Bergson, Plato and Arendt. Stocker examines, I would say, a central philosophic point in Murakami’s work which is emerging in the field: the extent of one’s moral responsibility in imagination. *Megumi Yama*, in “Exploring *Hear the Wind Sing* as an Initial Story: Encounter with Derek Hartfield as the Starting Point for Haruki Murakami”, considers Murakami’s very first novel and his creative process through the concepts of Jungian psychology such as individuation.¹⁴ Yama touches on themes of life and death, reality, the soul, and passing through walls, boundaries or thresholds. Following Yama, we move on to three articles which consider Murakami in relation to existential thought: *Adelheid Rundholz* and *Mustafa Kirca’s* “The Art of Being: Haruki Murakami’s *Killing Commendatore* and Kierkegaardian

¹³See note 9.

¹⁴See further: Megumi Yama. “Haruki Murakami: Modern-Myth Maker beyond Culture: From the Personal to the Collective Level”, *Jung Journal*, 10(1), 2016, 87–95; Megumi Yama. “Haruki Murakami, Novel as a Method: ‘Memory’ and his Creative Process”, *In Statu Nascendi*, 2022, pp. 44–66.

Existentialism”; *Ljiljana Pticina’s* “Haruki Murakami: An Existential Perspective on Personality and Individuality in selected novels”; and *Piotr Pietrzak’s* “*Norwegian Wood* and the emergence of Murakamian Existentialism”. Rundholz and Kirca consider themes of trauma and core identity, the role of imagination and the importance of Art in relation to *Killing Commendatore* and Kierkegaard’s stages of existence: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Pticina focuses on Murakami’s *After Dark* and *Norwegian Wood* in terms of individuality, personality and darkness with reference to Jean-Paul Sartre and Nikolai Berdyaev. It is maintained that responsibility and freedom are key topics in Murakami’s fiction, and Pticina considers how Murakami relates this (or not) to religious thought. Pietrzak also explores *Norwegian Wood* and argues that the novel articulates a therapeutic project for readers through the protagonist’s way of coping with tragedy and trauma, such as suicide, which is briefly considered as well in Pticina’s piece. There is also reference to responsibility through the concepts of Emmanuel Levinas as well as a reflection on how literature can be incorporated into wider philosophical debate. This can be connected to the perspectives of Dil, De Boer and others, in that Murakami’s work certainly deals with existential questions and problems which can be experienced through his fiction. Finally, my own article (*Joseph Thomas Milburn*) “Haruki Murakami and Conceptual Personae: Fuzzy Authorship and The Sheep Man”, considers the character of The Sheep Man from *A Wild Sheep Chase* and *Dance Dance Dance* as a philosophic figure,¹⁵ with reference to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of conceptual personae and Mikhail Epstein’s hyperauthorship as well as the role of imagination. This at times abstract piece attempts to reflect more generally on the relationship between philosophy and literature, between fiction and reality, which is felt to be characteristic of Murakami’s work through the metaphysical spaces he creates.

Whilst Murakami is an incredibly popular and commercially successful writer, it is argued that his work deserves academic and particularly philosophic consideration. It is clear from the extent of engagement with his work that, at the very least, his fiction can be incorporated productively into philosophic discussion and projects which relate to philosophic issues.

¹⁵ It was only after completing this piece that I came across the following article by Dolphijn which considers Johnny Walker as a conceptual persona in *Kafka on the Shore*: Rick Dolphijn. “‘The World of the Grotesque is the Darkness Within Us’: The Noir Geoaesthetics of Murakami’s Nakata”, *Fast Capitalism*, 8.1, 2011.

These discussions are important because they deal with fundamental questions of identity, ethics and how we relate to reality. This shows that fiction is invaluable for such debate. Murakami's work can be interpreted on a philosophic level because his stories deal with philosophical themes and allow readers to experience them. Whilst this is true of all good literature, Murakami's has a certain something to it: a certain quality which I feel has to do with the imagination. That is, Murakami's fiction allows us to pass through boundaries of fixed reality into unknown spaces; it deals with the ontology of such spaces, the worldview or attitude towards such spaces, and the *ethos* or way of living, of connecting, across such spaces. In any case, we will let you make up your own mind as you consider the various perspectives offered in *Haruki Murakami and Philosophical Concepts*. I hope that you find that Murakami's work and our work with it will allow you to think more about such questions, that is to think more philosophically.

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PART I

Reflections



A Very Philosophical Murakami

Matthew C. Strecher

It is almost an understatement to suggest that philosophical discourse plays a role in how one reads Murakami Haruki, for his fiction has always been connected with key epistemological questions. In fact, Murakami's fiction has always been concerned with the nature of existence, with realities rather than reality, with modes of consciousness, with life and afterlife, and most of all, with the place of the individual within a larger collective.

This last is of particular interest because the question of the individual goes beyond simply exploring our place in society, a crucial matter that is nevertheless, for Murakami, rather mundane. His early works dwell on this problem at length, as his protagonists, loners in Japan's group-oriented society, resist pressures from official and unofficial powers to conform. We see this particularly in two of the author's finest early works, *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* (1982; trans. 1989 as *A Wild Sheep Chase*) and *Sekai no owari to hādo-boirudo wandārando* (1985; trans. 1991 as *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*). Each of these texts contains a moment at which the hero, a nameless, unprepossessing Everyman, declares himself to be free and proclaims his independence from the System that seeks to control him. There is an almost Zen-like detachment

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to the narrator of *A Wild Sheep Chase* when he tells his enemy, “I am an utterly mediocre person. What have I got to lose? If you can think of anything, clue me in, why don’t you?”¹

It is in the later works, however—arguably, from *Nejimakidori kuroni-kuru* (1994–96; trans. 1997 as *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*)—that these works delve into the nature of a collective metaphysical space, a sort of cross between dreamscape and Carl Gustav Jung’s collective unconscious.² The Murakami protagonist from this point discovers his astral form, moves and acts freed from his physical body, and interacts with the astral forms of other characters in the story. At times his purpose is constructive: he makes contact with allies, gains information, offers help; at other times, it is destructive, as he uses the space to confront and destroy his enemies. Sometimes we see these movements, other times we do not. In *Umibe no Kafuka* (2002; trans. 2005 as *Kafka on the Shore*) the titular character utilizes a kind of metaphysical wormhole through consciousness and, freed from physical space and time, murders his father. *Shikisai wo motanai Tazaki Tsukuru to, kare no junrei no toshi* (2013; trans. 2014 as *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*) strongly hints at the possibility that the eponymous Tazaki Tsukuru has raped, and later murdered, a high school friend after invading her home in an astral state.

What does all this mean? Among other things it presents a relatively unified fictional depiction of existence external to or beyond the physical life of the body, which we all know is temporary and bound through time to decay and die. Murakami’s fiction confronts us with lively and readable stories that contrast what Socrates would call the “world of becoming” and the “world of forms.” At the same time, his work offers us a glimpse into the collective Unity of that “world of forms,” a space in which the individual continues to exist as a living entity—a soul—but does so in a state of perfect integration with everything else. “The most important thing about life here,” one such inhabitant tells the protagonist of *Kafka on the Shore*, “is that people let themselves be absorbed into things. ... It’s as if when you’re in the forest, you become a seamless part of it. When you’re in the rain, you’re a part of the rain. When you’re in the morning,

¹Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*, translated by Alfred Birnbaum. London: Penguin, 1990, p. 139. Original quote may be found in *Hitsuji o meguru bōken* [A wild sheep chase]. In *Murakami Haruki zensakuhin 1979–1989* [Complete works of Murakami Haruki 1979–1989]. 8 vols. Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1990, Volume 2, p. 178.

²For more on the collective unconscious, see Carl Gustav Jung, “The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious” in the *Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Vol. 9 (1980).