The human and ecological disasters of Minamata and Fukushima highlight Japan’s need to plan for a sustainable future. Ogata Masato, a Minamata fisherman, through his philosophy of “life-world” suggests that this quest for a sustainable future requires a change in the epistemology of social science. His philosophy offers a postmodern version of Japan’s heritage of animism, where humans are connected with all living beings, including the souls of the living and the dead, as well as animate and inanimate entities in nature. His philosophy thus presents an alternative framework for a new modernity. Keywords: Fukushima, Minamata, World Risk Society, nuclear disaster, environmental ethics, connectedness, life-world, Ulrich Beck, Ogata Masato.

Ulrich Beck, the German sociologist, writes that Japan has become part of the “World Risk Society” as a result of the 2011 nuclear accident in Fukushima (Beck 2011a). By “World Risk Society,” he means a society threatened by catastrophic risks such as nuclear accidents, climate change, and the global financial crises that transcend national and social boundaries. According to Beck, such risks are an unfortunate by-product of modernity and pose entirely new challenges to our existing institutions (Beck 1999). As Gavan McCormack points out, “Japan, as one of the most successful capitalist countries in history, represents in concentrated form problems facing contemporary industrial civilization as a whole” (McCormack 2001, 5). The nuclear, social, and institutional predicaments it now faces epitomize the negative consequences of intensive modernization.

The stalemate over nuclear energy in Japan—the restart of the two (Ohi) reactors in 2012 and the massive citizens’ protest against it—suggests that we are indeed at a significant crossroad. But what is the issue? A quick look at the antinuclear demonstra-
tions shows that the slogan, “Life is more important than money!” is ubiquitous, suggesting that many citizens see a problem not only with nuclear power generation but also with something more fundamental: the prioritization of the economy over life. The fact that such an obvious proposition has to be raised as a point of protest indicates the depth of the problem. How is this rather extreme dichotomy between life and the economy to be faced at this point of modern history? And what will be Japan’s contribution, if any, to envisaging a new kind of modernity?

In this article I explore these questions by drawing upon the notion of “life-world” presented by Ogata Masato, a Minamata philosopher-fisherman whose ideas developed in response to the Minamata disease disasters in the mid-1950s. I discuss this concept in order to reflect on the relationship between nature and humankind in an attempt to envision a new kind of modernity that does not generate self-destructive tendencies as denoted by the notion of the World Risk Society.

World Risk Society Japan

The relevance of the concept of the World Risk Society is obvious with regard to the disaster unleashed at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant on March 11, 2011. There is no question that substantial radiation has been released from the stricken reactors. Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) estimated, based on data collected at the plant, that 900,000 terra-becquerels of radioactive materials (iodine-131 and cesium-137) were released into the atmosphere (TEPCO 2012a), which constitutes 17 percent of the fallout from Chernobyl (Obe 2012). An additional 150,000 terra-becquerels were released into the sea in the first six months after the accident alone (NHK 2012). An international scientific collaborative study estimated, on the other hand, that based on data collected from across the globe, cesium-137 equivalent to 43 percent of the Chernobyl emission was released into the atmosphere between March 11 and April 20, 2011, and that 18 percent of that release was deposited over Japanese land areas, with most of the rest falling over the North Pacific Ocean (Stohl et al. 2012).