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*Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan*

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# A Review Essay of *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan*

Matteo Cestari <sup>1</sup>

*Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan*. By Harumi Osaki. Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2019, xii+ 292 pp., ISBN 978-1-4384-7309-3 (hardback), \$85.00.

## The Controversy about the Kyoto School

In the long controversy surrounding the Japanese war responsibilities during the last world conflict, an entire chapter is dedicated to the so-called Kyoto School (*Kyōto gakuha* 京都学派) of philosophy. These thinkers, under the influence of the founders of the group, Nishida Kitarō (西田幾多郎 1870-1945) and Tanabe Hajime (田辺元 1885-1962), were among the first in the world to develop a Euro-American styled philosophical discourse outside the geographical boundaries of America and Europe. Certainly, they represented one of the first attempts to create a philosophy not entirely dependent on Euro-American texts and authors. It is however still debated whether and to what extent such an attempt can be defined

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as fully and consciously trans-cultural<sup>2</sup> and not simply a self-orientalist approach that juxtaposed simplified cultural identities, such as “the West” versus “the East” or “Japan.” The core of the problem is to understand whether the Kyoto School presupposed an original differentiation among cultural areas or realized the interconnected nature among them. Although things are not easy to solve, when dealing with the Kyoto thinkers’ intricacies, a way of facing this problem goes through an analysis of their political and cultural ideas. The Columbus’s egg would be an inquiry on their political philosophies with a strong link to their theoretical ideas. Curiously enough, this path has been relatively uncommon among the specialists of Japanese philosophy,<sup>3</sup> which may indicate a prevailing interest in theoretical and religious matters, probably influenced by the idea that these thinkers are to be considered Buddhist, despite the fact that we better should not take this statement for granted (see Cestari “Between Emptiness and Absolute Nothingness”).

Despite, or probably because of, the importance of this religiously oriented trend, a long and animated debate between prosecutors and defenders of the Kyoto scholars has developed as in a sort of interminable trench war. A controversy has arisen between those who accuse these thinkers of being complicit with the ultranationalist regime, and others who affirm their resistance to it. As Kenn Nakata Steffensen puts it: “[T]he ‘side-steppers’ have attempted to navigate around the political ideas in order to salvage a religious-philosophical core, while the ‘side-swipers’ have rejected the school as a whole on the basis of questionable interpretations of those ideas” (Nakata Steffensen 70). This debate reveals a juxtaposition between religiously and politically biased issues, as much as between some who need to save and others who need to blame the Kyoto

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<sup>2</sup> Here, I use the term “trans-cultural” to avoid the idea of “comparative philosophy,” provided that a “comparison” seems to assume an original difference between “Eastern” and “Western” thought, a debated proposition especially in postcolonial studies.

<sup>3</sup> There are of course some notable exceptions. Suffice to mention the volume Goto-Jones from 2008, which aims exactly at filling this gap.

thinkers. A common approach to both formations has been a focus on biographies or historical details, either favorable or fatal to their reputation. Alternatively, some critics have used generic and disqualifying labels to define their entire work. Many disregarded or avoided the necessary inquiry in their political and moral themes. This inquiry on the contrary is the main task of Harumi Osaki's new book, *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan*.

### The Structure of the Book

Osaki's approach is partially innovative for it connects some central ideas of the Kyoto School—such as, the key concepts of “absolute nothingness” (絶対無 *zettai mu*) and “active intuition” (行為的直観 *kōiteki chokkan*)—with fundamental (and often annoying) political and moral issues. Among them, the author enumerates the Kyoto thinkers' stance toward nationalism, as both liberating and oppressing factor; their conflicting and yet murky relation to modernity, as it appears in their ambivalent approach to colonialism, both Euro-American and Japanese; their recipe for developing a moral philosophy that may reconcile the subject's freedom with the nation's control. These issues in the book help to define a complex picture of both theoretical possibilities and problematic orientations.

Such an approach is possible due to the role granted by the author to postcolonial motifs in dealing with Japanese philosophy. This is a distinguishing feature of the book, compared to the few others on this issue. Osaki's basic assumption comes from Sakai Naoki's work. In fact, as Sakai has stated:

What gives the majority of Japanese the characteristic image of Japanese culture, is still its distinction from the so-called West. . . . the loss of the distinction between the West and Japan would result in the loss of Japanese identity in general. (Sakai 564-565)

Far from negating Western universalism, Japanese cultural particularism is complementary, even essential to the definition of Japan as such. This helps to reconsider the stereotypical relationship of opposition between Japan and the “West,” but also to redefine the bonds between Japan and the rest of Asia, which were at stake during the Second World War.

The assumption of such a binarism between the West and Japan leaves unquestioned Japan’s identity, assuming that it is representative of the entirety of all oppressed Asian colonized peoples. Hence, any criticisms to Japanese colonialism and imperialism in Asia are “hastily equated with advocacies of Western domination” (13). As a result, the debate on the Kyoto School’s involvement in Japanese colonialism is generally avoided by the academic literature, as well as by the living proponents of the Kyoto School. Since the opposition to Eurocentrism was used ideologically by Japanese imperialists as a justification for their expansionism in Asia, this lack of criticism comes at the expense of the non-Western-and-non-Japanese countries, which directly experienced the brutality of Japanese domination.

Osaki deepens the Kyoto philosophers’ moral and political doctrines during the war, which was the period prior to their general association to Buddhism occurring after the Second World War. Her book consists of two parts. In the first one, she discusses in detail the main ideas developed by four Kyoto thinkers—Kōsaka Masaaki (高坂正顕 1900-1969), Kōyama Iwao (高山岩男 1905-1993), Nishitani Keiji (西谷啓治 1900-1990), and Suzuki Shigetaka (鈴木成高 1907-1988)—who attended a series of symposia, held from November 1941 to November 1942.<sup>4</sup> These symposia expressed an articulated vision of World History and Modernity by Kyoto

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<sup>4</sup> Three of these meetings were organized by the journal *Chūōkōron* 中央公論 on the “philosophy of world history”; one by the review *Bungakukai* 文学界 about “overcoming modernity.”

School eminent figures and reached a good audience among the Japanese intellectuals of the mid-War period (1937-1945).

The second part of the book discusses Nishida Kitarō's political philosophy and deepens in particular its relationship with Hegelian thought and the problem of modernity, raising many questions about the inner coherence of Nishida's theoretical architecture, especially the consistency of absolute nothingness in the light of his statements on the Japanese nation, the imperial family, Japanese ethnicity, and the like.

Osaki's choice of dealing with these two subjects (the symposia and Nishida's political philosophy) is not left to chance. She consciously endeavors to establish the connection between the two. Part of her thesis is that the positions expressed in the two debates by Nishida's disciples are built upon the philosophical premises of their master. This is not a light premise, since much of the defense strategy pursued by Nishida's advocates is frequently centered around the idea that he had no part in the ideological constructions of ultranationalists. Even where he used the regime's slogans in his writings, the advocates insist, he was trying to change these words from within, in search of illuminating his compatriots and opening their minds, considering that in that period no open resistance to the regime was possible. These however are not the conclusions of the book, which on the contrary affirm that Nishida's thought was quite actively supportive of the imperial ideology.

### **The General Inspiration of Osaki's Book**

A welcome approach of this book is the search for a critical, yet fair, presentation of these philosophical positions. Osaki rejects any a priori defense or condemnation, as well as any easy process of labeling. By "labeling" here, I refer to the mechanism of naming an event, a thinker, or a group of intellectuals with the resort of more or less abstract category, without giving any explanation about why such a category is used. As a

result, the definition apparently clarifies, but actually oversimplifies the matter, hiding its complexities and bringing it back to the safe ground of the already known. The rhetorical strategy of labeling is at work, for instance in the frequent use of the word “fascism” to define the political thought of the Kyoto School. As is known, such a word has a long usage history, from Mussolini’s political ideas, to revolutionary conservatism, to the common use that today combines Nazism and Fascism, generally indicating a kind of rightist authoritarianism. However, Fascism, Nazism, ultranationalism, religious traditionalism, etc. are not interchangeable terms.<sup>5</sup> Labeling an idea or a thinker “fascist” without any exact clarification of the meaning of this category, or any specific textual evidence or context, does not represent a specific intellectual claim and appears more rhetorical and emotional than a real argumentation.

On this matter, Osaki is very careful to avoid such a coarse use of categories. In order to define the Kyoto School’s political thought, she prefers the terms “nationalist,” “ultranationalist,” and “ethnocentrist,” which are far more precise in their content and adequate in defining the Kyoto School. Above all, she generally offers sufficient textual evidence for her claims. In general, her analysis of their political philosophies brings her to state that “their project does not seem to provide even an attempt at overcoming ultranationalism from within.” Their partial disagreement with nationalists or ultranationalists is not a proof of any resistance (104).

This statement could allude to a diversity of positions within Japanese ultranationalism. In fact, in a 1994 essay about Nishida’s political thought, not cited by Osaki, Pierre Lavelle has already advanced the idea that Nishida’s philosophy should be compared to imperial doctrines and the positions of different factions contending political power at that time. According to Lavelle, there are traces of some limited debates and slight

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<sup>5</sup> The use of the term “fascism” for Japanese ultranationalism before the Pacific War is subject to an intense historiographic controversy. See e.g., McCormack “Nineteenth-Thirties Japan: Fascism?” and Lavelle “The Political Thought of Nishida Kitarō”.



nuances among these factions. For instance, the ultranationalist extremists affiliated to the army faction were on more radical positions than the official imperial doctrine, which represented the reference point for Nishida. According to Lavelle, the Kyoto School in general was politically sided with the so-called *Tōseiha* 統制派, or “faction of control” of Prince Konoe Fumimaro (近衛文麿 1891-1945)<sup>6</sup> and the so-called *Kannen uyoku* (観念右翼, Idealist right). This means that, far from resisting the ultranationalist tide, the philosopher actively cooperated with the orthodox imperial faction, while opposing the “military participation in national affairs” (Lavelle 164). Crosschecking Nishida’s positions with the main political factions of the period, Lavelle explains that his ideas were almost perfectly aligned with religious traditionalism. Nishida expressed some reserves only about the preeminence of Shintō and about intellectual freedom.<sup>7</sup> This historical backdrop places the Kyoto School philosophers within their own ideological context.

Still, this is far from being enough. As Osaki did, we need to address the philosophical meaning of such positions if we want to discuss their cultural relevance in those years, as well as their possible potential for today. This is where postcolonial themes prove themselves precious. Osaki recalls some of the problems often encountered when dealing with Japanese philosophy. On one hand, there is the tendency to assume an ontological difference between Eastern and Western philosophies, the former allegedly close to religious-existential experience, the latter supposedly dominated by rationality. On the other, ironically, this “difference” attests to a peculiar agreement or complementarity among the terms, which endorses and reinforces cultural stereotypes (7-8). Following Sakai

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<sup>6</sup> Konoe, two times prime minister of Japan during the ultranationalist period in the 1930s, was a staunch nationalist. Nishida actively belonged to his think-tank, the *Shōwa kenkyūkai* 昭和研究会 (see Lavelle 142).

<sup>7</sup> “. . . Nishida maintained a more liberal concept of educational policy—‘liberal’ in a general, intellectual, and moral sense of the term, and not in its precise political meaning” (Lavelle 164).

Naoki's criticism of Japanese particularism as being the hidden ally of colonialism and universalist philosophy, Osaki refuses to draw a "clear-cut division between the Kyoto School philosophers' pure philosophy and their political discourses while taking the latter as mere deviation forced to occur by historical conditions" (13). This implies questioning the role of "pure" philosophy in ethnocentric and nationalistic discourse and its part in the formation of the colonial world. Osaki assumes the risk of challenging the "structural complicity between the West and Japan" (Sakai cit. in 14), thus questioning the juxtaposition of universalism-versus-particularism at the foundations of modern philosophy itself.

### **The Three Characteristics of Japanese National Subjectivity**

Getting into the details of the book, in the first part (chapters one to six), Osaki reconstructs what the four thinkers defined as "three characteristics of Japanese National Subjectivity" (chapter three), developed as theoretical foundation of the domestic debate on the role of Japan in world history and its relation to modernity. These characteristics are the basic assumptions of the political and moral philosophy elaborated by the four thinkers at the symposia, and, Osaki claims, by Nishida as well. The first characteristic of the Japanese national subjectivity is defined as the "unity between the subject and the substratum of the State," which implies, according to Kōyama Iwao, identifying the samurai/*bushidō* 武士道 ideal of selfless death for his own lord as the ethical standard for all Japanese populace. In a similar vein, Nishitani Keiji believes that the citizens of the state should voluntarily renounce their freedom for the sake of the state, annihilating themselves in it. As Osaki sharply notes, in Nishitani's writings, "subject" means only the agent of volition (63). At the same time, he considers the nation-state as the collectivity of Japanese national citizens. Consequently, the citizens are autonomous, even when controlled by the state, because they are ultimately self-controlled (*ibid.*). However, Osaki points out, this autonomy is dubious: "If the state imposes control upon

citizens in order to incorporate them into it, it must preexist this incorporation.” This condition indicates “a gap between what controls and what is controlled, or . . . between the subject and the substratum of the state” (64).

The four thinkers—Kōsaka, Kōyama, Nishitani, and Suzuki—define the second idea of Japanese national subjectivity as the “interpenetration between the national and the international” (chapter four), believing that this subjectivity, far from being limited to the Japanese case, could be applicable to an international scenario. In the words of Kōsaka Masaaki, such an alleged international character can be found in both “Western world and Eastern world” and is equivalent to absolute nothingness. There is however a difference, in that nothingness was neglected by the West and discovered by the East (68-69). In Kōsaka’s reasoning, absolute nothingness becomes the metaphysical principle of world history and the basis for an ethics of responsibility, which goes far further than mere nationality. Such a universality allows the thinkers to define their ideas about history and ethics as suitable to the entire world. Moreover, it allows considering their ideas pluralistic in comparison to the “Eurocentric” conception of history, because they believe that Japan is not the only center of world history. On the contrary, different world-historical centers could emerge, thanks to the Japanese center, which, first in history, has changed the course of things away from Eurocentrism. The Japanese center is absolute not for being the only one, but because the practical subjects included in it act in accord to the world-historical necessity (72-73). This position implies a conception of absolute nothingness as the ground of both Oriental culture and the world history. Allegedly, Japanese tradition has the advantage of having it as its quintessence. Hence, in such a scenario, nationalism combines with internationality. Japan appears to be privileged, as it is the only nation enabling a plurality of centers, a trait defined impossible in Euro-American cultures (74-75). Moreover, due to Japanese experience of modernity, it can participate in the modern world and grasp “the truth of this world,” perceiving “its error,” as Kōsaka Masaaki states (cit. in 75), which consists in the atomistic idea of human

beings. Contrary to the “hypocrisy” of equality and freedom, Kōyama affirms the “oriental tradition,” based on differences and hierarchy, which enables human beings to be put in the right place (76-77).

Absolute nothingness plays an important role in such a debate, Osaki points out, being directly identified with Japan. The “Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere,” the flamboyant cover/slogan behind which Japan exerted a ruthless colonial domination, needs an ethics identified by Kōsaka in the “ethics of ‘place,’ which puts each in the right place. . . . It is the logic of the mediation by place,” and such a mediation “[o]f course . . . has its center, which is Japan. All subjects converge upon this center, are represented by, guided and organized from it” (Kōsaka, cit. in 81).

For those familiar with the so-called “logic of place” (*basho no ronri* 場所の論理) by Nishida, to which these words refer directly, this passage by Kōsaka exemplifies an important phenomenon, which sheds a disturbing light to the entire philosophical development of the Kyoto School: the ideological use of their theoretical key-terms as justification of Japanese colonialism. A sort of transformation is happening here: in its original formulation in the logic of place, the place of absolute nothingness (*zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所) is the utterly undetermined. It may be interpreted in a more epistemological than ontological manner as a form of demarcating the self-suspension of the Subject’s objectifying thinking. Only because of its self-negating character can it be defined as absolute nothingness. Here, I found some similarities with the Buddhist notion of “emptiness of emptiness” (*śūnyatā śūnyatā*), although ambiguously close to a kind of metaphysical-ontological version of it (Cestari 334 ff.). Without such an absolute indetermination, guaranteed by absolute self-negation, any place becomes *something*, an objectified element, whose level of determination can vary, but which is clearly a being, a relative entity. Osaki explains that Kōsaka “tacitly assumes” what she defines “Nishida’s equation between place and nothingness” and this would have remarkable consequences, since nothingness becomes the “principle of world history and the source of moral energy driving it” (81).

However, this point should require more in-depth analysis. The main problem is that technically, in Nishida's logic of place, there are two levels of nothingness: relative and absolute. This stance is reaffirmed in the historicist period with the differentiation between two levels of contradictory self-identity (*mujunteki jikodōitsu* 矛盾的自己同一): absolute and relative. The absolute level refers to the most fundamental level, generally the historical world. The relative level can actually be a less general, more specified being (*ibid.*). Hence, the real problem here would be defining whether *this* nothingness/place is absolute or not. On this point, Osaki is not always very clear, also because she does not clarify this very distinction. However, what is clear is that Japan in Kōsaka and the other thinkers' approaches is provided with a privileged position, which makes the difference with absolute nothingness very subtle.

The same special treatment for Japan and its culture is quite common in Nishida's later writings. For example, he defines the imperial family as a "being of nothingness" (*mu no yu* 無の有), or glorifies the *kokutai* (国体 essence, or body, of the nation, one of the nationalist key-terms during the Pacific War) and defines it as the "realization of the self-determination of Absolute Present" (Nishida XI: 188). We could ask whether such a "special character" of Japan and its culture is to be interpreted as relative or absolute. Maybe a third, intermediate category, created just for Japan? Particularism and ethnocentrism appear evident here. Above all, the use of ontological (and religious) terms in order to describe or justify, not to mention support, politics is hideous. It exerts a specific kind of violence, defined as "epistemic violence" (Pasquinelli 8), that is not uncommon among ideologues all over the world and is at the source of the philosophical strength of colonialism. As a venomous form of violence, it can be hardly detected and insinuates itself in the subalterns, which become integral parts of the dominant system, although in the form of an apparent juxtaposition, as in the phenomenon of reverse or self-Orientalism. Hence, even if Osaki's reconstruction is not entirely precise or complete on this matter, the point is taken: the Kyoto School clearly shows an eth-

nocentric bias, in those many passages in which Japan in one way or another is proclaimed as superior to the other countries, because of its supposed special relationship with the most fundamental ontological principles. This is quite a widespread bad habit among philosophers and the Kyoto School is not an isolated example. Osaki recalls the case of Hegel, who exalted the role of Germany and German culture in the world. I could add the case of Heidegger, who reconstructed in a very suspicious manner the entire history of philosophy, reducing it to an affair between ancient Greeks and modern Germans. Still, we should be more radical in our questioning: is it just a bad habit? Or is it a programmatic approach to reality, coherent with the very development of modern philosophy and integrated in the dominant system of knowledge-power?

As for the third characteristic of Japanese national subjectivity, the four thinkers define it as the “reciprocal determination between the virtual and the actual” (chapter five). Actually, this trait is already implied in the previous characteristics. For example, Kōyama invokes the *need* for Japanese to follow the supposedly ancient ethics of the samurai as the form of ethics that the Japanese *always follow*. His position converges with Nishitani’s affirmation that “self-annihilation and devotion to public service are the Japanese people’s traditional virtues” (53). Yet, he also realizes the need of overcoming the “inertia of submission or servitude taken for granted in the clichés of this ‘tradition,’” and in order to do so, he has to “give Japanese spirituality a sense of responsibility and subjectivity” (54). Consequently, he equates such a responsibility with freedom, or spontaneity, which means “being unconstrained by others,” a state of mind which can be identified with “nothingness” (Kōyama cit. *ibid.*). By the way, the samuraization of society was a programmatic strategy of indoctrination starting from the late Meiji period (1868-1912) on, in order to create a strong national identity. This means that once again, Kōyama exemplifies a case of objective cooperation with the ideological structure of the state. His argument implied here is clearly circular: something, which should already be present, needs to be affirmed as a moral duty,

indicating a discrepancy between description and prescription. Elsewhere, Nishitani finds a gap between the controlling state and the controlled citizens, but affirms that such a gap is destined to disappear, once the citizens identify themselves with the state (87).

The implications of the reciprocal determination of virtual and actual are many and, Osaki indicates, dangerous. Starting from this principle, we could think “that what actually does not exist somehow exists on another level” and that certain entities, such as “national collectivity, even if it has not properly organized in the present, has been and will always be there” (ibid.). This approach disguises reality, obviously to the advantage of the stronger part (the state), and can allow the imposition of any kind of fantasies upon reality, passing off ideology as true and sound fact. The problem of relationship between virtual and actual has many implications. For example, it has to do with the question of tradition: Osaki mentions the debate about the so-called “invented traditions” inaugurated by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their famous book, *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). From this standpoint, Osaki states that “the traditions that modern nation-states invoke to claim themselves to be rooted in history and therefore ‘natural’ are often modern inventions” (140). Certainly, in many cases what the Kyoto School thinkers glorify as true Japanese tradition (*bushidō* ethics and the familiar *ie* 家 system included) and the norm for every Japanese (and even the ought-to-be standard for the entire world) are very much the results of reconstruction, recreation, selection, or pure invention occurred in the process of Japanese modernization. However, it would have been interesting for Osaki to consider some aspects of the problem of tradition that should require even more caution and that have an impact on the relationship between virtual and actual. I will deepen this problem in the final section of this review.

Here, let me explore some implications of this idea. Nowadays, the mutual determination of virtual and real is, with all due differences to the Kyoto School’s context, a common issue in everyday life. Since we live in

a period of “epistemic uncertainty,” we are not entirely sure about what is and is not real. The human tendency as old as the world to cheating and deceiving has only been amplified by the technological devices we use today. Yet, as testified by many political forces (e.g., propaganda and populism), economic trends (e.g., financial speculation preferred to production), technological devices (e.g., deep-fake video apps, for one thing) and even our own mind working (as in the fascination exerted by conspiracy theories), we human beings seem to be quite fond of virtuality. We prefer it to the ever-changing, often-disappointing, never-satisfying reality, and we are quite happy to negate or manipulate it. We love our dreams and hopes and in order to make them real we create gigantic and elaborated forms of personal or collective illusions, so that what started as conventions tends to become the only reality. Recent history, after all, is determined by political and cultural entities based on invented traditions, such as the myths of “nation,” “race,” and “people.” Such inventions are built around imagined communities, purposely creating forms of organizing consensus and exerting power. Yet, virtuality can also be a liberating device, when it consciously changes the common representation of history.

In order to illustrate my point, I would cite two examples of alternative history drawn from cinema. The first example is Quentin Tarantino’s movie *Inglourious Basterds*, whose finale consists in a liberating scene of mass-kill of Nazi highest officials, Hitler included. The second example is the TV series *The Man in the High Castle*, based on the homonymous book by Philip K. Dick. The story takes place in an alternative timeline in which the Axis has won the War. For the people of that timeline, watching documentaries of our timeline makes them realize that defeating the Nazis is possible. These two examples stand for the liberating power of art as a form of virtuality that possesses the strength to change people’s consciousness, inducing the awareness that our history is not to be taken for granted and must be considered with responsibility. In other words, we must keep being vigilant, because things can easily go in a different, worse direction.



How are these examples different from the Kyoto School's use of virtuality in their idea of "reciprocal determination of the virtual and the actual"? Although in a nutshell, the above-mentioned alternative history cases show a tiny, yet remarkable, difference in the use of virtuality. This difference does not consist in the type of freedom involved (individual freedom as lack of *external* constraints, in the alternative history representations; "religious" freedom as lack of *internal* constraints, in the Kyoto School ideas). More exactly, it has to do with the fact that the Kyoto School thinkers with their mixture of description and prescription have expunged the possibility of divergence, of dissent, imposing the version of history decided by the nation-state, which is the only one appointed to choose what is and is not real, what is the true content of history. The alternative history representations cited above, on the contrary, *presuppose* such a divergence from the start, because their effects (the subversive element of final surprise in Tarantino's movie and the consciousness of difference from our reality in Dick's story) is based on a subversion of the official course of history.

### Hegel and Nishida

An important issue addressed in Osaki's book is the relationship between Nishida's philosophy and Hegel as part of a general analysis of Nishida's political philosophy (chapters seven to twelve). She reads Nishida as criticizing at least two points of Hegel's philosophical project. His first criticism concerns the identity of absolute spirit as a latent being and ground of all beings, which gives it the power to prescribe what kind of being appears in the world. His second criticism deals with the nature of Hegel's absolute spirit, which is supposed to be the most universal, but actually turns out to be an individual entity of sort, which imposes its particularity upon the individuals (chapter ten). The distance from Hegel and Eurocentrism could be considered as one critical index to understand whether Nishida has succeeded in getting rid of philosophical ethnocentrism.

Unfortunately, according to Osaki, Nishida's political thought is still dependent upon Hegel. Moreover, Nishida appears as a good example of how universalistic principles such as absolute nothingness end with being particularized: as long as absolute nothingness is *especially* linked to Japan, Japanese culture, the imperial family, and the like, it inevitably becomes a kind of latent being, not very different from Hegel's. Technically, Nishida's project is centered around the most inclusive universal, based on reflexive negation (the self-negation, which negates negation without affirming another affirmation as a counter-affirmation) (Cestari 339 ff.). This philosophy dedicated to the search of the true universal, which could become a form of identity-free philosophy, turns into an ethnocentric glorification of the state and its morality. For instance, Nishida defines the state and especially its law as expression of the inner rationality of the world, grounded on the self-expression of historical world (225-228). His position therefore is not so different from Hegel's exaltation of German culture<sup>8</sup> and affirmation of the rationality of the real. Nishida justifies the existent, depicting reality as a coincidence of "Finite and Infinite, Relative and Absolute, Time and Eternal" (Suzuki 147-148).

### **Nishida's Ethnocentrism**

Nishida takes an unmistakably essentialist and ethnocentric stance when dealing with Japanese culture and the imperial family. As an example of such a stance, consider the following passage:

That Individual and Universal are eternal like Heaven and Earth, in the sense that even the things that radically oppose each other are one—i.e., they are an absolutely con-

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<sup>8</sup> "The German Spirit is the Spirit of the new World. Its aim is the realization of absolute Truth as the unlimited self-determination of Freedom" (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* 142, cit. in 193).

tradictory self-identity—and that all things are a unity centered on the Imperial Family (*kōshitsu* 皇室) and that Individual and Universal are radically creative and develop vigorously; all this could be the self-awareness of historical life belonging to us Japanese. . . . It could be said that . . . this position [of contradictory self-identity] is realized in the life of the “Body of the Nation” (*kokutai*), centered on the Imperial Family. (Nishida XI: 187-188)

If absolute nothingness as the supreme foundation of all things manifests itself in everything, why should it manifest particularly in *some* things, which, strangely enough, are Japanese? From such a perspective, his political philosophy is not an innocent mistake, an accidental error. Nishida’s political doctrines should be contextualized within his “logic of reconciliation,” as in Miki Kiyoshi’s (三木清 1897-1945) words, his rosy approach to reality, his optimistic perspective of the world as an artistic creation. Scarce attention is paid to all inequalities, mistakes, illusions, and deceits, so common in the human world.

In this, his philosophy remains firmly Hegelian and, notwithstanding his intentions of criticizing Hegel’s rationalism and nationalism, he sanctifies the existent, a move always foretelling a lack of justice and truth. Osaki, while deepening the theoretical relationship between Hegel and Nishida, is particularly interested in underlining the lack of ethnic consciousness of the two thinkers, tracing it back to their philosophical positions. Hegel was faithful to his program of creating a philosophical justification of Europe’s success, projecting a diachronic order (mankind’s progress) onto the synchronic spatial order (the geopolitical situation of his times) (238-239). Similarly, although Nishida (and his followers even more) realized that such was an injustice to be amended, they ended up with switching a cultural domination with another, mimicking the same projection of diachronic over synchronic. The only difference was the transformation of the myth of progress (Hegel) into the myth of primeval origin (Nishida), directly drawn from traditionalist State Shintō motifs. As

Osaki puts it, Hegel and Nishida both did an “ethnocentric universalization of the particular” (236).

### **The Kyoto School and the Question of Modernity**

In this context, the problem of modernity in the Kyoto School is central. In Osaki’s volume, we find this problem discussed both in the context of the Bungakukai symposium about “Overcoming of Modernity” (chapter one) and in Nishida’s criticism of Hegel (chapters ten to twelve). How did the Kyoto School thinkers interpret modernity as an object of thought? Moreover, how much were they conscious of being modern?

The distance between these two questions is probably the source of many unresolved issues on this matter in their thought. Generally, they equated modernity with “the West” and considered Japanese modernity only as a phase through which their country had to pass, in order to understand the limitations of the West. They affirm that through such an experience Japan has already overcome modernity and, in the process, has become the most suitable country for leading the non-Western countries to a new world order. Actually, their main concern in this criticism toward the West-as-Modernity is the question of modern subject. For example, the four thinkers during the symposium repeatedly emphasize that the main problem of Modernity-as-the-West is the “atomistic view of humans,” opposed to the “Oriental” tradition (76). Nishida too criticizes Hegelian subjectivist logic and his subject-centered knowledge (185 ff.): true logic, true knowledge, he thinks, should come from a self-emptying subject. The ethical and political recipe of the four thinkers consists in replacing the individual subjectivity with collective, state subjectivity. Nishida, on the other hand, reads the modern subject as problematic since it comes from the opposition with the world and nature (see, for example, Nishida XIV: 381). He draws this very motif from Hegelian philosophy. It is Hegel in his earlier writings that defines subjectivity as the principle of

modernity, in both its epistemological and affective sides. Epistemologically, subjectivity lies at the core of Cartesian doubt. Affectively, such a doubt is source of absolute pain (*der unendliche Schmerz* or *das absolute Leiden*), as a path of desperation deriving from the loss of all certainties. Through dialectics, Hegel finds a way to overcome this spiritual Calvary and finally reach the freedom of/as Subject.<sup>9</sup> From such a perspective, it appears that Nishida too has a similar orientation and he owes Hegel a lot of his interpretation of modernity.

Personally, I am not so sure that Nishida's purpose of criticizing Hegel was a deliberate "project of overcoming Western modernity," as Osaki states (see, for example, 196, 207). Were it true, the "smoking gun" of the direct connection between his philosophy and his disciples' on the matter of "overcoming Modernity" would be proven. He certainly was criticizing Hegel for his subjectivism and probably did think that the entire European history of philosophy was subject-centered, but my impression about Nishida is that he never reflected seriously on the problem of modernity as such, unless we think that modernity in itself can be identified with the question of modern subject. Still, this is not the interpretation of Osaki, who defines the problem of modernity according to Habermas's interpretation of Hegel's modernity as the movement from the old to the new (as the literal translation of *Neuzeit* goes) and its continuous self-differentiation. This position by Habermas is certainly an intriguing thread, but it should neither be taken as the (at least, conscious) position of Nishida, nor the only possible key to interpret his consciousness of modernity.

Certainly, the issue of modernity helps to reveal the Kyoto School's hermeneutic strategy. In fact, the connection between modernity and "the West" is often used to avoid considering the deeply modern character of their own nation-state. Hence, focusing on individualism and Cartesian subjectivity as if this may correspond to the essence of modernity is

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<sup>9</sup> I owe this interpretation of Hegel to Ruggenini, "Ambivalenza del moderno."

more a way of eluding, than of facing this problem. Samurai ethics or the centrality of imperial family are both modern, Meiji-invented traditions. Disregarding the modern character of Japanese nation-state is a common rhetoric, which de facto aligns the Kyoto School to the state propaganda of the time.

### **Some Remaining Problems**

Osaki's book is certainly a thought-provoking and solid approach to the Kyoto School philosophy. Her perspective includes both theoretical and practical (political and ethical) themes, programmatically aiming at finding out their connections and synergies. From such a perspective, her approach is uncommon and very welcome. Clearly, her awareness for these themes derives from a deep interest in postcolonial studies, which brings the discussion to a level in which theory is another way of representing and exerting power. On this point, the book is an important contribution to the study of Japanese modern thought. Commendable, although due, is the search of substantiating one's theses with accurate references to the original texts of the authors discussed. However, in Osaki's approach there remain some limitations.

As already stated, the first limitation regards the problem of tradition and the application of Hobsbawm and Ranger's theme of invented traditions to the Kyoto School. Certainly, they invented traditions (or adapted them to the regime's propaganda). Yet, more caution and a deeper discussion on the use of the "invented traditions argument" may have suited better to the case in question. As Stephen Vlastos has remarked, some aspects of Hobsbawm and Ranger's ideas need to be extensively rediscussed. For example, it would be difficult to juxtapose invented and true traditions, given that technically all traditions are invented: does a non-artificial tradition exist? Or a tradition not established by anyone? Does this have any meaning at all? Furthermore, the difference defined by

Hobsbawm and Ranger between traditions and customs—the former being decided by elites and fundamentally unalterable and the latter spontaneously formed between the populace and subject to change—is too rigid and should contemplate a long list of intermediate cases, not to mention that even the most unchangeable tradition is interpreted and adapted in time and in ways not always controllable or desirable by the elites that initially created them (Vlastos 4).

Additionally, we should not underestimate the fact that the permeability and change of social factors such as traditions is what allows not only manipulation and ideology to spread, but also the empowerment of once oppressed minorities, as well as the change of social roles. On this matter, Osaki states that when speaking about traditions, Nishida and his colleagues ignored Hobsbawm and Ranger's paradox of the past invented by the present: "However, if this is the case, it does not matter to Nishida" (140). This is quite a curious affirmation, given that Nishida could have no knowledge of Hobsbawm and Ranger's arguments. Although not theoretically circumstantiated in the book, this observation may imply that according to the author we can judge the past (Nishida) on the basis of our present (the contemporary debate on tradition). Epistemologically, such an approach, which stems from the rejection of historical relativism, could refer either to axiomatic-deductive, or to pragmatic-processual models of knowledge. The consequences of referring to these two models of knowledge vary greatly and it could have been useful to know Osaki's opinion on the subject.

With this kind of reasoning, however, we run the risk of anachronism and historical universalism, an approach that may sanction the epistemic supremacy of the present standards. Ironically, such a supremacy is always destined to last until it is criticized and overcome by future knowledge. Incidentally, such a perspective is not entirely incompatible with Hegel's Absolute Spirit or Nishida's Absolute Present. If we turn to this problem from an ethical perspective of history, can we judge someone

for something he or she thought, despite her or his ignorance of the ethical standards of our debate today? Should there be some kinds of considerations for these ethical differences, possibly without falling into the trap of historical relativism? Of course, this does not mean to endorse ultranationalism today. On the contrary, we must strive in order to get free from the bad choices or habits of our fathers and ancestors. Still, the ethical standards of our approach should consider historical differences. The risk, otherwise, is that of judging the past according to the present standards, and feel justified for deleting or sterilizing the past. Hence, this approach could become the premise to apply censorship and lose just that historical awareness, which has put in motion the movement of criticism toward the past.

The second limitation concerns a lack in the book's content: Tanabe Hajime is the great absentee of this discussion. He barely appears in the footnotes. This however is strange, since it is well known that the four thinkers at the symposia were at the same time disciples of Tanabe (Nishida retired in 1928, whereas Tanabe was professor at Kyoto University until 1945) and that some important scholars came to define him as the real founder of the School (Heisig xii). Given such an importance of him, his own straightforward endorsement of Japanese ethnic state, his ethics of self-sacrifice, and his logic of the species (*shu no ronri* 種の論理), which dealt with the relationship between the individual, society, and the state, it is only a pity that Osaki's book did not include a more organic treatment of Tanabe's figure. It could have helped to shape the map of the Kyoto School's historical and theoretical ideas in a much more precise manner.

The third limitation I find in the book is both a question of content and methodology and has to do with religions. Dealing with the Kyoto School, even its political and moral philosophy, without *any* word about the role of religion and religious motifs and metaphors in their discourse means to leave out of the picture a really relevant issue. Nowadays, such a recourse to religious themes and conceptions gives us the impression



that they speak from the viewpoint of a “traditional” or “ancient” religious authority (in this case, Buddhism), although they are not representative of any Buddhist organizations. This authoritative assumption surrounds the reception of their writings both in Japan and in the West, especially after the “religious turn” occurred to the School after the end of the Pacific War. Anyway, here I am not referring to the assumption that the Kyoto School philosophers were more or less affiliated to some Buddhist schools (generally Zen 禪 and Shin 真 Buddhism). I am pointing to the massive use of religious ideas and categories in their texts. Specifically about the issue at stake, in general the use of religious themes influences and defines political and moral philosophy. In particular, as is well known, in modern pre-War Japan, political order had a religious sanction, only cloaked behind the idea of State Shintō as civic cult. This disguise allowed the state to impose religious cults of the emperor over all populace, and avoid the international blame from abroad. After the ultranationalists came to power, the use of religious themes and rites allowed an even tighter grip over all the population, even the would-be opposers, such as Christians and the Marxists. In sum, in modern Japan, religion together with education was one powerful *instrumentum regni*, forged to reach and condition the deep consciousness, the affective lives, and the bodily sensations of populace, and turn them towards the nation.

From such a perspective, the anti-subjectivist orientation of the School assumes a different meaning, perfectly coherent with, and even integrated in, the regime’s propaganda. In the case of Nishida and Tanabe, religious metaphors and concepts have been the source of many misuses: Nishida justified the unity between religious and political power (*saisei itchi* 祭政一致), and considered sovereignty (*shuken* 主權) as bound to religion, in his allegiance to the imperial house (Nishida X: 333-334). Tanabe pushed the relationship between politics and religion even further. He used religious motifs and adopted a rationalistic approach to religious symbols in order to build an actual cult of the nation. He went so far as to write that “the nation is the only absolute thing on this earth” (Tanabe VI: 145) and that there is the need “of freeing Christianity from

myth and placing the nation instead of Christ. The nation is the absolute manifestation of Buddha's incarnation" (Tanabe VII: 30-31).

In Osaki's book too, we find traces of such a political use of religious themes. The four thinkers spoke abundantly about self-annihilation or self-negation as the perfect ethos for Japanese people. Such an anti-subjectivism has religious origins, loosely deriving from the Buddhist idea of *anātman*, in its East-Asian version (*muga* 無我, *mushin* 無心). The Kyoto School philosophers were not confessional thinkers and the political responsibility of Buddhist communities in this case is rather limited. Nevertheless, a general problem here seems pertinent, that is the need of drawing a clear distinction between politics and religion in any democratic country.

More specifically, we should reflect on the possibilities and dangers of applying the Buddhist ethics of selflessness to modern world, in the light of postcolonial critique. Does this idea encourage or hinder political, social, and historical consciousness embedded in ethics? Can (or should) critical attitude toward political and social matters influence ethics, based on Buddhist selflessness? The Kyoto School has exemplified some modern ethics of no-self, theorizing self-sacrifice and even one's death for the sake of one's state and community. Certainly, the ones who sacrifice themselves for the state can be considered selfless, but are they human? Or rather, are they not a kind of weapon in the hands of nationalists and warmongers? If the consciousness of such dangers is lacking, a person will end being totally blind to national egoism, ignoring the violence and injustice any nationalism brings with itself, no matter how selfless he or she is.<sup>10</sup> This is a challenge for the present of a Buddhist-oriented ethics and politics. Although it never directly spoke about this theme, Osaki's book may indirectly help to reflect upon it, providing some historical examples of this issue.

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<sup>10</sup> On the relationship between Buddhism and the war, see Victoria *Zen at War*.

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