

FRONTIERS OF JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY



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EDITED BY

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CHISOKUDŌ

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## Preface

Those engaged in philosophy in European and American universities rarely pay attention to the debates past and present going on in Japan. The obvious reason for neglecting such a long and rich intellectual tradition is that few Western philosophers have the requisite linguistic and historical knowledge to evaluate seriously what Japanese philosophy has to say. But there is a still deeper reason, one that is seldom articulated by philosophers in the West. Their lack of engagement with non-Western philosophy is often motivated by the idea that philosophy is an intellectual discipline that emerged in a Western context (namely, ancient Greece), developed into an academic specialization in Western institutions of learning (namely, in medieval universities where philosophy was taken as the core of the “liberal arts”), and played a fundamental role in the rise of Western science (namely, in connection with the construction of a “scientific worldview” in early modern Europe). If there is interest in philosophical currents and schools outside of the West, it is tied up with the question of how Western ideas have been appropriated there and in what directions they have developed.

This approach of non-Western philosophers clearly betrays a colonial attitude. The emergence and evolution of their own tradition are taken as normative for considering other traditions, and foreign modes of thought are finally viewed in the light of their own. However, there are philosophical methods and standards of rationality that can stand on their own without having to be measured against or compared with one’s own. Stepping away from the colonial attitude requires critical reflection on one’s own tradition. Three things strike me as important in this regard.

First, it is worth asking in which places and under which social, politi-

cal, and institutional conditions philosophy emerged as an intellectual discipline. The concrete milieu leaves a decisive mark on the philosophical questions that are asked. For example, it is no coincidence that, given the varieties of social order in ancient Greece, questions should arise as to what the proper form of the state should be. Similarly it is no coincidence that throughout medieval Western Europe, where the impact of Christianity was strong, the question of the relationship between God and the human person should have been central. Philosophical questions and problems do not fall from the skies; they always rise up out of concrete contexts and historical constellations. To be clearly aware of these contextual ties is to assert critically that one's own questions and problems do not simply belong to a general "philosophia perennis" but are expressions of a specific culture and time. This is particularly clear when one compares one's own questions and problems with those that were posed in another culture and under other circumstances. Only then will the mixture of overlaps and serious differences come to light; only then will it become apparent that there is no way to assert in advance which are the important problems. By engaging with philosophical currents of another culture, one will also be driven to recognize and rethink the birthmarks of one's own philosophical problems

Secondly, it is also worth examining the relationship of philosophical debates to religious, artistic, and scientific debates. Philosophy is not an isolated discipline, untainted by other intellectual pursuits as it were, posing its own questions and constructing its own self-enclosed systems. Rather philosophical debates take up numerous questions that have become dominant in circles outside of philosophy. The famous problem of theodicy, which was discussed in a distinct religious context, is one such example. Without the assumption, within that context, of a good God, the question of how a good God can permit evil in the world would not have been raised. The decisive factor here is that the philosophical problem can only be stated with precision if one takes into account the tacit assumptions prevailing at the time. This means that there is no deciding in advance which contexts are relevant and which problems deserve special attention. We have first to compare various contexts with one another—both within a particular culture and across cultures—and inquire how a problem could become significant in a spe-



cific context. Only then can the uncritical assumption that philosophy is an autonomous discipline be overcome. To be specific, only when one has compared the catalog of philosophical questions posed in the Western tradition (ranging from theodicy to semantic and metaphysical questions) with the corresponding catalog of Japanese philosophy, can one realize that there is no such thing as a “natural” philosophical question, floating free of space and time. What is taken to be important in one philosophical tradition depends in large measure on its ties to structures outside of philosophy, from religion to art to science. In different cultures these ties take completely different forms.

Thirdly, rational standards and claims to conceptual clarity and logical stringency, need to be subjected to critical demonstration. There is no general definition of rationality that can be imposed on all philosophical discourse. Rather these standards take shape within such discourse and serve in part a variety of aims. It is hardly fitting to take the standards that governed medieval scholastic debates and hold them up as the norm of what it is to be rational. They were specific to discussions held in small university circles where they served a specific aim (namely, the interpretation of classical texts). Only a comparison of the standards of rationality elaborated in different contexts can clarify the full range of possibilities and dispose of the idea that the matter can be settled once and for all and formulated in universally applicable terms. This fact becomes even clearer when Western and non-Western standards of rationality are being compared. There is no neutral standpoint from which to decide what is rational; this is a matter to be taken up within philosophical discourse itself. To judge what counts as a rational argument and what does not requires a painstaking reconstruction of different discourses, always keeping in mind historical changes that can take place within such discourse.

Given these three points, a concern with non-Western philosophy is not only important for broadening the current base of philosophical knowledge. Nor does it serve only, as we stated at the outset, to clarify where and how Western philosophy has been received. Engaging non-Western philosophy is a process of critical confrontation with one’s own philosophical questions, methods, and standards of rationality. It has an essential contribution to make in overcoming colonial attitudes and see-

ing that if we are to measure foreign philosophies with our own yardstick, we need to measure our own philosophies with theirs. Japanese philosophy is not simply one more field of specialization for experts. It poses a challenge for all Western philosophers to critically reflect on their own tradition and thereby take seriously the ancient philosophical mandate, “Know yourself!” Self-knowledge succeeds only through knowledge of the other.

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## Foreword

The immediate occasion for gathering together the thirteen essays that make up this volume was a conference held at the Humboldt University in Berlin from 18 to 21 October of this year. Entitling the collection *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* was a natural choice. Geographically, the discussions took place at the periphery of the circle of scholars interested in the indigenous philosophy of Japan. In terms of content, there is much to be found in these pages that reflect pioneer work in the ongoing development of that tradition. The fact is, the number of students abroad, Japanese or otherwise, specializing in the field is already overtaking the number in Japan. The volume, and I would venture to say also the quality, of the research is not far behind. But more than place and focus, it was the frontier ethos that suggested the title. The same spirit of cooperation and exchange that has become a defining mark of those participating in the small but steadily expanding international forum on Japanese philosophy was once again in evidence.

All together, there is no longer anything particularly strange about addressing the future direction of Japanese philosophy from Europe. A mere twenty years ago the claim might have sounded presumptuous, if not slightly ridiculous. Even today the idea that an assembly of scholars from six countries, most of them less than two years on either side of their doctoral dissertation, should in any sense be considered representative of the borderlands of Japanese philosophy may sound to some like little more than misplaced flattery. It is a good deal more than that. Even the language barrier, which so many Japanese intellectuals have so long thought to be an insurmountable obstacle that keeps outsiders permanently at one remove from the subtleties of their native thought and insures that control over its development will remain firmly in the

hands of those who have been born and reared on the inside, has begun to come down, stone by stone, as surely and demonstrably as the Berlin Wall itself. I think it is time to say it clearly: *Japanese philosophy belongs to the world*. No more than Aristotle is primarily for the Greeks, Kierkegaard for the Danes, Llull for the Catalans, or al-Ghazzālī for the Iranians, Dōgen and Nishida have outgrown the circumstances of their birth. Their writings have left the ranks of the arcane and esoteric to be read and studied around the world as part of the general patrimony of philosophy.

The number of up and coming scholars straddling cultures to wrestle with the philosophical texts of Japan, particularly twentieth-century thought, is increasing. Little matter that Western academia is slow to reflect this change. For now, it is enough that this younger generation is motivated and hard at work. In time they will be in a better position than any of us to decide what the next step is and how best to take it.

I am proud to have had the chance to participate in the meetings and to prepare this volume for publication. A special thanks goes to Ralf Müller for organizing the entire event and managing the internet site of “Nihon tetsugaku” to facilitate content among participants and share information with the wider scholarly community. In addition to basic funding from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science, I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance of the Centre d’Etudes Japonaises at the Institut Nationale des Langues et Civilisations Orientales in Paris.

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