

JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY IN THE MAKING 1
CROSSING PATHS WITH NISHIDA

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Japanese Philosophy in the Making 1

Crossing Paths with Nishida

JOHN C. MARALDO



CHISOKUDŌ

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for James G. Hart
Fellow pathfinder and guide for fifty years

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Prologue

“Is there any real philosophy in Japan?” a friend of mine once asked. And so I wondered, how does defining philosophy confine it? Has it broken out of its confinement and appeared in various lands? And how does the work of Nishida Kitarō in Japan contribute to the momentum of philosophy? These are the questions that lie intertwined, mostly beneath the surface, in this collection of essays. Composed over the past three decades, older essays appear here in lightly revised form, with newer ones at times clarifying the approaches and findings of earlier ones, and at times questioning them. I focus on Japan in its encounters with European thought, but my own encounters have left me convinced that the identities we call Japan, Europe, and philosophy are as shifting as they are settled, almost as if they are floating signifiers looking for a fixed designation. What has remained constant is my fascination with the landscape of thinking outlined in a small number of texts. I have enjoyed clear vistas opened by venturing into that thought, and just as often struggled to untangle the briar patches in which I found myself. Instead of pursuing a bird’s-eye view that would orient the various essays into a single-themed work, I found myself following different tracks that might give me a ground-level view, a perspective on a few features within a vast landscape. Along the way, the questions that kept coming up were the questions of how philosophy gets defined, how it has traversed time and place, how it has been conveyed by the thought of Nishida, and how we can continue to translate it.

The essays collected here answer these questions implicitly at best, more by way of example than by explicit argument. This prologue is intended to provide an entry way. And the first thing to say is that my

questions seem to presuppose the universal occurrence of something called philosophy, and so a word about that presumption is in order.

THE CIRCLE OF DEFINING PHILOSOPHY¹

What, then, is philosophy? The question seems to ask for a definition that one could write in a dictionary. Such a definition would state what makes philosophy what it is; it would specify the “whatness” or quiddity of philosophy, and would describe it as distinct from other things. It would determine this essence by distinguishing the essential features of philosophy from the accidental, contingent, or alterable characteristics that may accompany the appearance of philosophy wherever and however it has appeared. The definition would identify an unchangeable core, without which any of its appearances would not really be philosophy. We might find such an essence in the Greek origins of philosophy, in the ancient distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, between the ritual language of the initiated and the practice of reasoned words—the search for unifying reasons and underlying principles. Philosophy’s true beginning, then, would be an *arché* or principle that articulates a necessary, logical origin and not merely a historical one. Philosophy’s definition would then be necessary and universal, not parochial or time-bound.

To define the essence we might also look directly at the word, *philosophia*: love of wisdom, of course—but in practice a love that springs from a sense of wonder or astonishment (*thaumazein*), and so a love that is more a yearning *eros* than a settled *philia*, and a wisdom that is more a relentless quest than a standing awe. The quest as we see it in Parmenides originated when philosophy separated from its mother *mythos*, heard her voice, the voice of the gods, as distinct from its own, and began to question the sayings of the gods. Philosophy developed

1. This discussion reproduces part of MARALDO 2004, with permission from the publisher.

a voice, a *logos*, so deep and yet so overarching that it was soon able to speak for all other voices and account for all matters spoken about, able to give more shallow or limited accounts their proper place and name, *mythology*, for example. Philosophy's accounting became categorizing, determining not only the different parts of the one world but the different manners in which those parts are apprehended.

After philosophy gave birth to the sciences and they began to take on an identity of their own, vying with philosophy, philosophy called itself their queen mother. This overarching science, to be sure, had been hydra-headed all along, its voice sometimes a chorus and sometimes a discord, thriving on dialogue and debate and the kind of questioning that marked its earliest years, issuing eventually in multiple identity crises and doubts about its foundations, its pedigree, and its difference. For all its inner discord, however, philosophy has never ceased its self-questioning. In the last hundred years, philosophy's quest to know itself is as much a mark of what it is as anything else. In three decades of teaching students—many with no background in the subject—I found it useful to define philosophy as the critical investigation of deeply perplexing questions: what is the best way to live, what is true and how can we best know it, and what are our obligations to one another? For those with advanced training in the subject, one of those deeply perplexing questions is the very definition of philosophy.

This entire reflection, of course, tells us little if anything about what exactly philosophy is. It hardly gives us a definitive statement, although it suggests some qualities often taken to delimit philosophy from other human endeavors: critical, fundamental, logical, systematic. More importantly, this sort of reflection indicates just how distinctively Greek and “philosophical” is the very quest for a definition of philosophy. Essence versus accidental features, underlying reasons versus capricious causes, origins and principles versus offspring and incidents, the name *philosophy* versus the various *ologies*, categories versus chaotic arrangements; persistent questioning, discursive dialogue, and disputations about difference and identity—are all expressions

specifically if not exclusively of a Greek-European heritage. We cannot escape this hermeneutical circle when we so attempt to define philosophy, a Greek term treated in a Greek way. We can, however, employ the practice of questioning to seek other ways to determine the purview of philosophy. If the quest for a lexical or generic definition of philosophy is circular, and remains within the confines of a Greek origin, we need not stay within those confines. Indeed we cannot if we are to understand the need today to reconsider defining philosophy.

CONTROVERSIES ABOUT A NAME AND A DOMAIN

But why reconsider defining philosophy at all? The reason is simple: a counterclaim to the name *philosophy* has become more and more prevalent. *Philosophy* today is used to designate traditions of thought that arose independently of the Greco-European provenance usually assigned it. The name *Indian philosophy* meets almost no resistance today, but whether Chinese thought should be called philosophy is a matter of controversy. Even more controversial is the question whether pre-modern Japanese thought counts as philosophy—not to speak of the worldviews of past non-literate cultures. If such controversy is “merely academic,” we do well to recall that it has at least two practical consequences. First, it examines prejudices—as philosophy has always done—and addresses the charge that predominant education is unwisely Eurocentric. It concerns a core of our education in a global era and affects the general reading public as well as university students. Secondly, and linked to the first consequence, the controversy is a matter of career choice and livelihood for many people. When university departments determine which fields should be covered and who gets hired to teach them, the stakes are especially high for those trained in “non-Western” intellectual traditions.

The first essay in the present volume rehearses some reasons to confine the name *philosophy* to thought with a Greco-European heritage. I counter those reasons with others discernible in that same tradition.

But we should not think it is only Western philosophers who refused to find philosophy in non-Western traditions. There have been numerous Japanese philosophers who have done so as well. The second essay presented here summarizes the relevant history. In short, when the word *philosophia* and the discipline it designated in the 1860s and 70s entered Japan, it met with a good deal of controversy and consternation. Several attempts were made to translate philosophical terms and to comprehend the sense of what it means to philosophize. Indeed, if perplexity itself counts as an origin of philosophical thinking, as the Greeks suggested, then the perplexity over the meaning and scope of *philosophia* can be said to originate modern philosophy in Japan. The translation of the word was eventually settled as *tetsugaku* 哲学, a novel compound of two Chinese characters with Confucian overtones. The same sinographs are now used for *philosophy* in China and Korea as well, and these two nations also have had their own controversies about this word and whether it should be applied to traditional thought before the influx of Western academic philosophy. To give but one example, in the 1920s the Korean Lee Kwan-Yong (1891–1933) attempted to replace 哲学 (pronounced *cheolhak* in Korean) with a word meaning something like the “science of essences”—and he did so in part because, as a scholar in a nation colonized by Japan, he wanted to resist a term that the Japanese had introduced.

In the 1880s, when the first university and first philosophy department in Japan were established, some professors favored an older Confucian term, *rigaku* 理学, roughly the study of principles and patterns. One professor, Inoue Tetsujirō, continued to write books on the philosophy (*tetsugaku*) of Japanese Confucian schools of thought, but most others limited philosophy to the study of Western texts—a practice that continues to this day. In 1901, Nakae Chōmin, a prominent intellectual outside the academy, made a comment that echoes to this day: there is “no such thing as philosophy in Japan.” He directed this remark at both Japan’s past thinkers and the “philosophy professors” then at the University of Tokyo. In the wake of the controversy over a

name and a domain, philosophers in Japan are notably self-conscious about the scope of their discipline.

WHAT COUNTS AS “JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY”?²

What then is the meaning and scope of the term *Nihon tetsugaku*, “Japanese philosophy”? I think we can detect four distinct uses of the term.

First, following critics of the Meiji-era (1968–1912) who rejected the notion that Japan had any philosophy of its own, *Japanese philosophy* simply designates philosophy conducted by Japanese scholars in a European key. These include professional philosophers in academic institutions who engage with the texts of Plato, Kant, James, Bergson, Heidegger, Derrida, Rorty, and other Western philosophers, adding their own critiques and refinements as they do so. They can be as “original” as any other philosopher composing in the same key, and as such there is nothing peculiarly “Japanese” about what they do. In short, Japanese philosophy in this first sense means simply philosophy of a Greco-European vintage distilled by people who happen to be Japanese. With few exceptions, such philosophers do not regularly analyze or cite texts from earlier traditions in Japan; and even where they do, there is no claim that these indigenous sources qualify as “philosophical.” The methods and the themes of philosophy must be Western in origin.

Secondly, at the other extreme, *Japanese philosophy* refers to classical Japanese thinking as it was formulated prior to the introduction of the European term and the discipline it designated. As long as this thought deals with ultimate reality or the most general causes and principles of things, it is considered philosophical. Japanese philosophy in this sense may be shown to derive from or relate to Chinese thought, but it is not informed by European philosophy. This is how

2. Here I elaborate on my summary in JPSB, 17–21.

Inoue Tetsujirō used the term *Japanese philosophy* a hundred years ago when he claimed to have discovered philosophy in pre-modern Japanese Confucian schools of thought, and argued that their concern with fundamental questions was on a par with that of Western philosophers.

A third sense of *Japanese philosophy* acknowledges that philosophical methods and themes are principally Western in origin, but insists that they can also be applied to pre-modern, pre-westernized Japanese thinking. People who practice Japanese philosophy in this sense understand it primarily as an endeavor to reconstruct, explicate or analyze certain themes and problems that are recognizably philosophical when viewed from today's vantage point. Works that deal with Dōgen's philosophy of being and time, or with Kūkai's philosophy of language, are examples of this third meaning. Granted, it takes some practice to identify the philosophical import of pre-modern writings and engage them in the light of modern philosophical terms and methods. Even where engagement takes the form of a more or less explicit dialogue between Anglo-European-style philosophy and pre-modern Japanese texts, modern philosophical assumptions and methods often remain decisive. A small number of philosophers in Japan allow for the kind of balanced dialogue where the critique is allowed to run in both directions. These thinkers not only read traditional Japanese texts in light of modern philosophy; they also use pre-modern concepts and distinctions to illuminate contemporary Western philosophy. They propose alternative ways to solve modern or contemporary philosophical problems. Whether these endeavors unearth philosophy retrospectively, or go further to use that thought as a resource for current philosophical practice, the aim of these philosophers is inclusion: making the Japanese tradition part of an emerging, broader tradition of philosophy. To give only two examples: Ōmori Shōzō (1921–1997) reexamined the relation between words and objects by reinterpreting the ancient theory of *kotodama*, the spirit of words. Yuasa Yasuo (1925–2005) reinterpreted the body-mind problem in the light of Japanese Buddhist texts. Japanese philosophy in this third sense, then, means traditional

and contemporary Japanese thought as brought to bear on present-day philosophizing.

A fourth sense of *Japanese philosophy* concentrates on those qualities that explicitly set it off from non-Japanese philosophy. The term then designates thinking that is not only relatively autonomous and innovative, but also demonstrates the “distinctive Eastern or Japanese originality” that Shimomura Toratarō and others found in the achievement of the most celebrated of twentieth-century philosophers, Nishida Kitarō.³ Insofar as this approach highlights the contributions to the field that are uniquely Japanese, it has been criticized as an instance of inverted orientalism—an appraisal weighted in favor of “things Japanese,” stereotyping differences from things non-Japanese, and minimizing the importance of historical variants. Be that as it may, Japanese philosophy in this sense indicates an explicit attempt to create a critical but original Japanese counterpart to modern Anglo-American-European philosophy. In terms of the politics of defining philosophy, the challenge is to avoid two dangers: forms of cultural imperialism that impose inappropriate categories on other cultures, and forms of cultural arrogance that assume an achievement like philosophy belongs to the West alone.

Justifications for each of these four senses have one thing in common: they are all self-conscious responses to an historical encounter with Anglo-European traditions that claimed *philosophy* for themselves. As such they reflect a particularly Japanese problematic. Objections to these four uses are apparent as well. The first sense, which restricts *Japanese philosophy* to Anglo-American-European philosophy as it is carried out in Japan, places too severe a limit on *nihon tetsugaku*. It ignores the fact that philosophy has always undergone development under the influence of “non-philosophical” traditions. The second sense—traditional Japanese thought that treats sufficiently fundamen-

3. SHIMOMURA 1977, 201. See MARALDO 1995, 228, for other references to Nishida’s distinctive “originality.”

tal questions—tends to drift away from critical awareness of its own reconstructive nature. The fourth sense, which limits Japanese philosophy to original contributions of a distinctively Japanese character, easily collapses into a myopic neglect of the conditions for innovation and distinctive difference.

In contrast, the third sense of *Japanese philosophy* acknowledges the Greco-European heritage of the *philosophia* brought to Japan but also recognizes the enrichments made possible by incorporating Asian sources and resources. It understands philosophy as a continuation of the radical questioning that has always been the hallmark of its self-understanding. At the same time, the drawback to the third sense is that it does not provide specific criteria to predetermine which texts should count as philosophical. I am convinced that we cannot draw up a catalogue of criteria for what is to count as philosophy before we examine the texts themselves. Philosophy has never been a field of inquiry whose methods and subject matter are already decided. If there is a defining characteristic to philosophy through the ages and across cultures, surely it is the habit of interrogating given definitions.

What sense of *Japanese philosophy* should prevail, then, in educating the public about this field? Recently, some scholars have suggested a distinction that helps resolve this problem. *Japanese philosophy* need not be the same as *philosophy in Japan*. Philosophy in Japan not only avoids ethnocentric connotations; it is also more balanced and inclusive. It designates what philosophers in Japan do and have done regardless of the provenance of their interests and methods. Thus it includes Japanese philosophers who work solely in the areas of phenomenology, or analytic philosophy, or philosophy of science, or historical and constructive studies of Western philosophers and traditions, to name but a few fields.⁴ These were areas that I and my co-editors of *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook* elected to omit and leave to other collec-

4. This is the premise of a new collection on post-war philosophers in Japan: LIEDERBACH 2017.

tions—simply to manage the length of the book, and not to impose a culturalist criterion.

But here I would like to take the discussion one step further. What if we were to be even more expansive in our definition of Japanese philosophy? What if we were to take to heart what philosophers in Japan do today when they engage with texts and problems of predominantly Western vintage? Just as they contribute to the expansion of Western-derived fields, we students of philosophy in Japan can expand “Japanese philosophy” by going beyond the straightforward translation and explication of texts in Japanese. We can take traditionally Japanese texts, insights, and methods in new directions and offer analyses that advance fields, like phenomenology, that are practiced worldwide today. In fact, several philosophers born outside Japan are already doing just that. I propose that we recognize the very endeavor to engage and apply Japanese texts as an extension of Japanese philosophy. *Japanese philosophy* can then designate work in non-Japanese languages done by non-Japanese natives, just as North American and British philosophers can practice “continental” philosophy, and just as European philosophers are now said to be doing American philosophy in their adaptations of pragmatism.

In this sense, I have come to understand Japanese philosophy as an ongoing, creative endeavor—as *philosophy in the making*. Indeed, for me this phrase describes all philosophical investigation—historical studies as well as pathbreaking new work—in as much as it remains work in progress, subject to reappraisal and reformation, to rethinking. *Philosophy in the making* particularly describes the way that Nishida Kitarō conceived the practice of philosophers of all traditions. I think it was also the way he understood what he himself was doing. One of his favorite refrains, “from the created to the creating,” easily applies to his own work—to the way he moved out of his sources, in both European and Asian languages, and ventured into original thought. Moreover, Nishida continually rethought and rewrote his own work; over and over again he took what he had created and fashioned it anew. Per-

haps the streams of repeated formulations we read did lend some continuity to seemingly discontinuous discussions. What is clear is that Nishida never thought of his work as finished; it continually emerged as a philosophy in the making. In like manner, our engagement with it continues to remake “Nishida philosophy.”

HOW IS PHILOSOPHY—JAPANESE OR OTHERWISE—
TRANSMITTED?⁵

While *Japanese philosophy* is not confined to the Japanese language, and Nishida’s philosophy cannot be limited to discourse in his language, I am nevertheless convinced that philosophy is inseparable from language. It may be that a profound silence, beyond language, is at the root of genuine discourse, as Ueda Shizuteru advocates, but then such silence must give rise to speaking and writing if philosophy is to emerge. I suggest that we take the frequently noted connection between thought and language one step further. Philosophy, I submit, is inseparable from translation. I do not mean that language is a translation of thought, as Plato and his translator Schleiermacher suggested; nor that internal thought is a translation of social language, as Vygotsky and others proposed. I mean that philosophy has depended and still depends upon the multiplicity of languages and translation between them.

Insofar as philosophizing is a cultural practice, it necessarily involves transmission and transmutation through time and through multiple languages. To put it more concisely, philosophical discourse occurs via the *trans-lation* of texts, spoken and written. I use this

5. Here I adapt material first presented in MARALDO 1995, with the publisher’s permission. A revised version, presented at the conference on “Japanese Philosophy in Translation—Linguistic, Cultural, and Systematic Themes,” at the University of Hildesheim, Germany, Nov. 25, 2015, benefited from comments by the organizer, Ralf Müller, and the other participants. ELBERFELD 2012, 312–64, further elucidates the relations among philosophy, translation, and pragmatics.

hyphenated term to designate not only the transference of texts from one natural language to another, but also the *transformation* of textually embedded problems, methods and terminologies both across and within natural languages. The trans-lation of philosophy is both an inter-lingual and an intra-lingual transmission, and it entails the formation of textual traditions. This “trans-lation” constitutes a *sine qua non* for the practice of philosophizing.

Trans-lation not only transmits texts; it can also transform the language into which texts are transmitted, as the second essay in this collection intends to demonstrate. And this transformation can in turn transform the culture in which that language predominates. On a broad scale, trans-lation is obviously not confined to the bounds of the discipline we call philosophy; it encompasses the world of literature and science, of culture as a whole. Thus the notion of translation supports the study called *cultural translation*, which examines translation between languages in the context of translation between cultures.⁶ It is also consonant with the idea of *cultural transfer*, proposed by the historians Michel Espagne, Michael Werner and Wolfgang Schmale, that explains why transfers among cultural regions arise prior to rigid national identities and demonstrates how a history first becomes “European” (or “Japanese” for that matter).⁷ That idea in turn advances the notion of *cultural mobility* that expresses the fluidity of cultures and cultural identities.⁸ Trans-lation is a way that cultures flow through time.

Translated texts, too, are fluid in nature.⁹ But the transference/translation of philosophical texts is particularly instructive, because

6. BURKE & HSIA 2017.

7. “Cultural transfer research makes the rigid, linearly delimited, and strictly systemic elements of each cultural phenomenon permeable, thereby revealing the hybrid and composite nature of cultural phenomena” (SCHMALE 2012).

8. GREENBLATT 2009.

9. An extreme example of the fluidity of texts, and its cultural consequences, is material examined in MERVART 2015. An announcement identifies the text in question as “a French-Jesuit report on the Russo-Qing diplomatic encounter from 1689 in its various

the practice of philosophizing has always included close attention to language usage. The case of the Japanese appropriation of Western philosophical texts during the Meiji era is especially illuminating, for it changed the way that Japanese intellectuals viewed past Japanese traditions and forged new ones. Sometimes they envisioned the lineages of thought that had formed their language and thinking as part of one greater tradition. This is what Inoue Enryō did in the 1880s when he presented Confucius, Buddha, Socrates and Kant as the four great sages of the single tradition of philosophy. Other scholars sharply divided Asian intellectual traditions from the newly introduced Western philosophy and began to practice thinking in a new idiom.

In both cases, traditions were identified and defined retrospectively, from a juncture in the present, as I have argued previously. (*Bushidō* or the Way of the Warrior is one prominent example, but this sort of retroactive construction is also evident for the traditions we now call Shinto and Japanese Buddhism.) But translation also forms and informs traditions as they go forward. And the forward movement into the future can involve the transformation of the source culture. This is what is occurring in today's appropriation of East Asian intellectual traditions in predominantly European cultures.

Nishida Kitarō was a consummate translator of philosophy. He reworked his sources, both European and Asian, into his own language and continued all his life to refine his positions. He is renowned for inventing new terms that challenge his readers' comprehension, but more prevalent was his way of transforming received ideas and problems. His translation of "pure experience," the phrase for which he is best known, is a case in point. He did not simply translate the expression from William James and then place it within a systematic development. He completely changed the context of the notion and

embodiments and uses, retranslated via Dutch into Japanese in 1805, [that] by the early nineteenth century acquired a new life in the context of the rethinking of the world order by many Japanese scholars and officials alike."

its analogues in Western thinkers. The new context defined pure experience—and its later transmutations like “enactive intuition”—as a pathway to understand all reality. Without explicit reflection on the problem of translation, Nishida’s philosophy continued to translate Western philosophy and transform previous Japanese thinking in two ways: it went beyond an attempt to translate faithfully and present the thoughts of others, and it kept returning to and reformulating the issues under discussion. That transformative endeavor was Nishida’s “experience.” Later in this collection I note that, after four decades of Meiji thinkers surveying the landscape of philosophy and defining myriads of terms, Nishida’s return to experience must have seemed like a breath of fresh air to Japanese readers.

Translation is perhaps most pronounced when it is least obvious, when texts come to sound natural and no longer seem like translated texts. Translation in this respect presented me with a serious challenge. With regard to making sense of Nishida in English, it meant that my discussions and translations of Nishida’s philosophy should ideally not be so close to his own terminology that they lapse into mere jargon, or sound like some “Nishida-speak” that is intelligible only to specialists. Yet I knew I could not begin by using language that is already “natural” to native speakers and trained philosophers. A long period of translation might make this kind of naturalization possible. Translations in the meantime will need to communicate well enough to transform the thinking and the language of readers. Aware that my pathways often go astray, this is the goal I have tried to keep in sight.