NISHIDA, KAWABATA, AND THE JAPANESE RESPONSE TO MODERNITY

STUDIES IN JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY

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Nishida, Kawabata, and the Japanese Response to Modernity

ANDREW FEENBERG

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Preface

The essays collected here represent an interpretation of Japanese philosophy and literature inspired by the peculiar path of Japanese modernization. I am not a specialist in Japanese thought but my encounter with Japan has overturned many of my ideas about my own fields, Critical Theory and Science and Technology Studies. The critique of the notion of pure rationality in both these fields was anticipated in the concrete historical situation of modernizing Japan in the early twentieth century. Japanese thinkers refused to see their culture as backward and instead claimed parity with the West on philosophical and literary ground. The parallel between cultural and technical self-assertion in prewar Japan is striking. Fascination with this remarkable history has led me to spend years studying the thinkers who created an original Japanese modernity.

Great Japanese writers were engaged in the paradoxical attempt to produce original works rooted in their own culture within forms adapted from Western sources. The most important Japanese philosopher, Nishida Kitarō constructed a strikingly original theory based on an idiosyncratic reading of the Western philosophical tradition. Similarly, the Nobel Prize winner, Kawabata Yasunari, wrote literature of great originality within the tradition of the Western novel. The question I pose in these essays concerns the struggle to create an alternative Asian modernity through the assimilation of Western thought.

The relevance of this struggle is evident as Western civilization loses its self-confidence and enters into a period of cultural crisis without precedent. We cannot, of course, simply adopt the innovations of prewar Japan, but there are significant lessons to be learned from this unique attempt to break the frame of Western thought from within.

I conclude with a discussion of one American philosopher who attempted to reverse the direction of influence and learn from Japan.

Chapter one, "Technology in a Global World," explores the parallel between Japan's syncretic assimilation of Western technology and the similar movement of thought in the Kyoto School. Nishida and his disciple Kiyoshi Miki developed a cultural philosophy of technology. In this they anticipated much current reflection on science and technology which also roots technology in culture rather than in a putative "pure" rationality. Nishida and Miki understand rationality itself as culturally inflected and attempt to find a mediation between its Western and Japanese forms.

Chapter two, "The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida," focuses on Nishida's conception of an Asian alternative to Western modernity. He developed a philosophical system derived in part from Western and in part from Buddhist sources. Nishida's theory of history culminates in a vision of a world of interacting cultural spheres, but the vision is marred by its ambiguous relation to Japanese imperialism.

Chapter three is entitled "Alternative modernity? Playing the Japanese Game of Culture." Kawabata's novel, "The Master of Go," stages the conflict between East and West through the emblematic championship Go match of 1938. The match appears to contrast the aestheticism of old Japan with the intruding modern ways imported from the West. Kawabata's real message is far more complex as I show through comparison with Nishida's philosophy and Lukács's theory of the novel. The defeat of the old master by the young challenger does not prove the superiority of modern ways but rather reveals the loss of cultural richness that results from isolating strategic performance from aesthetic form.

Chapter four, "Experience and Culture: Nishida's Path 'To the Things Themselves'," contrasts Nishida's theory of experience with Heideggerian phenomenology. Nishida was influenced by phenomenology and was aware of Heidegger's thought. His own concept of place (*basho*) must be understood in this context. Place is not to be understood as a thing in the world but rather as the preconceptual background of awareness within which things appear. Nishida's formulation is unique in denying any association of this background with an individual consciousness. He calls this depersonalized place of being "absolute nothingness," with obvious reference to Buddhist metaphysics.

Chapter five, "Zen Existentialism in America," discusses the philosophy of Henry Bugbee, an American thinker influenced by D. T. Suzuki. Suzuki was a friend of Nishida and through him Nishida's idea of nothingness entered the American scene. But unlike most American reflections on Zen, Bugbee was a thoroughly trained scholar who identified primarily as a philosopher rather than as a religious thinker. His philosophy privileged action and he found in Zen a way of bridging the gap between the American tradition of pragmatism and existentialism.

Thanks are due reviewers for *Philosophy East and West*, John Maraldo, Ed Mooney, Ōhashi Ryōsuke, and especially Uehara Mayuko and Arisaka Yōko for advice and translations of Japanese texts. Without their help these essays could not have been written.

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"Technology in a Global World," in *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, in R. Figueroa and S. Harding eds. (London: Routledge, 2003), 237–51. A revised version of this essay was published as chapter 6 of *Between Reason and Experience* (MIT Press, 2010).

"The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida," in J. Heisig and J. Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), 151–73. A revised version of this essay was published as chapter 8 of *Alternative Modernity* (University of California Press, 1995).

“Alternative Modernity: Playing the Japanese Game of Culture,” *Cultural Critique*, Winter 1994–1995: 107–38. A revised version of this essay was published as chapter 9 of *Alternative Modernity* (University of California Press, 1995).

“Experience and Culture: Nishida’s Path to the ‘Things Themselves,’” *Philosophy East and West* 49/1 (1999): 28–44.

“Zen Existentialism: Bugbee’s Japanese Influence,” in E. Mooney, ed., *Wilderness and the Heart: Henry Bugbee’s Philosophy of Place, Presence and Memory* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1999), 81–91.

Introduction

A Personal Reflection

Yoko Arisaka

It is no exaggeration to say that I initially learned everything philosophically interesting about Japan from Andrew Feenberg. This is a collection of essays not by a specialist on Nishida or even on Japanese philosophy but by a brilliant thinker whose reflections on Japanese philosophy and culture are among the most philosophically insightful and delightfully interesting. Both in terms of the literature on Japan and a variety of cross-cultural issues, they open Japanese philosophy to a wider audience beyond the particular themes taken up here.

Specifically, the essays center around the nature of "modernity" and reflections on possible alternative forms of it. Japan was one of the earliest non-Western countries to undergo radical modernization, and the varieties of Japanese philosophy that arose as a result represent attempts to negotiate between the universalism of science and philosophy on the one hand, and the particularities of its own culture on the other. Japanese society itself became a hybrid of the two. Anyone visiting Japan will notice that Tokyo is a hypermodern city and yet distinctly non-European and non-American. This is not only a question of customs but also of technologies. From the cute robots to the washlet toilets, innovations take forms seen nowhere else. The Euro-American version of modernity has spread throughout the world, but might there be other possible forms? And might not these alternatives emerge from countries outside Europe and America? Or are they really no more than superficial cultural variations?

These questions remain at the forefront today as China continues to exert itself as a world power. But the debate over modernity vs. tradition is far from over in other countries judged to be still "developing" according to the norms of Western modernization. Japan was one of the earliest examples of this struggle, and this book tries to uncover what is politically and philosophically at stake in the process. But there are many places in Africa and Asia that continue to grapple with the question of alternative modernities in their own way, even as they rush to modernize and globalize in line with Western-style development programs and to maintain the financial aid on which they have come to depend. Infrastructures in many parts of Africa, for instance, are being modernized with economic assistance from China, but is not the hybrid they are being promised neither African nor Chinese, but just one more example of the same modernity one can see in any Western city? Andrew Feenberg's writings take us beyond the post-Meiji intellectual history of Japan to embrace the question of modernity on a contemporary, global forum.

I came to the United States in 1980, just as I had turned eighteen, full of hopes for forging a new life away from what I had experienced as a rigid, misogynist, and freedom-robbing society in Japan. I threw away my dark-blue school uniform and replaced it with shorts and T-shirts for everyday schoolwear in Southern California. But, as is the case with so many of us who leave Japan to follow our dreams abroad, a few years of the monotony of sunny skies day in and day out, not to mention the creative but outlandishly portioned meals, I also came to a new appreciation of Japan "from the outside." Old patterns of thought and behavior took on a new significance. I found myself beginning to cherish things I once thought I knew well enough to reject. Confucian virtues of ritual, filial piety, and humanity began to look less intolerable, and in fact seemed to restore a kind of stability and civility to human relationships. Temples ceased to be boring historical sites and took on symbolic importance as an expression of the transiency of life. I longed for the four seasons with their infinite variations of sky and landscape and the distant sense of aesthetic wonder they had once provided. As it turned out, Japan, with all its delicacy and attention to detail, was actually not all that bad. It was during this time of reassessment and affirmation that I first met Andrew Feenberg. It was 1986, and to me he was "Dr. Feenberg," the professor who taught that formidable subject known as philosophy at San Diego State University.

My first encounter with philosophy was Henry Bugbee's 1958 book, *The Inward Morning*. Dr. Feenberg suggested that if I wanted to study philosophy, I should perhaps start with something that was through and through American and yet expressed ideas in terms that would be familiar to me. The work was a philosophical journal, heavily influenced by the solitary reflections of Thoreau. Although the entries did not deal explicitly with Japan, the author's existential insights resonated deeply with what he called "Zen." By that, he meant ideas that resonated with what he had found in the writings of D. T. Suzuki. I myself was already in a reappreciation-of-things-Japanese mode and had begun to do *zazen*, which had made my discovery of *Zen and Japanese Culture* all the more powerful.

As Dr. Feenberg had probably surmised, I soon found myself engaged with teasing out the Zen-like themes and notions from Bugbee's book. I put my arguments together in an undergraduate research paper and sent it to the author, who was retired in Montana at the time. Much to my surprise, he returned the paper with extensive comments on the back of each page. He wasn't sure of the term "American Zen existentialist," but he seemed to appreciate my work. He understood notions like finality, presence, immersion, and absoluteness to signify that things reveal themselves in the here and the now, in their sheer existence, in which one can be involved as a witness, as a self immersed in the eternal now. Bugbee understood such absolute moments as occurring in different settings altogether different from Zen meditation—such as sailing in rough seas—and had surely lived such moments himself. I was pleased to see an analysis of Bugbee included as the final chapter of this collection, appropriately entitled

"Zen Existentialism in America." For me, *The Inward Morning* had come first; it opened my eyes to questions that were the start of my entire philosophical career.

Nishida would come later. In fact, the ideas and arguments gathered together in these pages are the very sorts of philosophical reflections that guided me on the way to becoming a scholar of Japanese philosophy. After Bugbee, Andrew's next suggestion was that I help him read *The Fundamental Problems of Philosophy,* the two-volume translation by David Dilworth of Nishida's *Tetsugaku no konpon mondai*, published in 1933 and 1934. Coming from Western Marxism and Critical Theory, he was sure the book would provide a novel and interesting approach as a Japanese *philosophy of praxis*. I consulted the original as his behest, naively imagining that my ability to read Japanese would qualify me to understand what it all meant. I found it hard going, but I also found myself being taken up in Nishida's world of ideas. It gave focus to my general studies in philosophy and kept the hope alive that someday I might be able to help answer my teacher's questions. That was over thirty years ago, and I am still at it.

Backing up, I decided to begin with Nishida's maiden work of 1911 and perhaps the one for which he is best known, *An Inquiry into the Good*. The first problem was to make sense of the notion of "pure experience," the standard starting point for all students of Nishida. Instead of repeating the cryptic phrase, "the unity of subject and object" (which makes little sense in English to those who are not already familiar with Nishida or the writings of Hegel and James), Andrew advised me to work at it until the phrase was *philosophically* clear, so that it would be intelligible even apart from Nishida's text. The project of sorting out what kind of "experience" this "pure experience" is supposed to be required analyses similar to what appear in Chapter 4, "Experience and Culture: Nishida's 'Path to the Things Themselves.'"

A comparison of Nishida and James on the notion of "pure experience" eventually became my Master's thesis, leading also to my first publication, which was co-authored with Andrew, "Experiential

Ontology: The Origins of the Nishida Philosophy in the Doctrine of Pure Experience" (*The International Quarterly*, 1990). From early on, Andrew had convinced me that Nishida's thought deserves to be known to philosophers and thinkers everywhere, not just in Japan or for those who can read Japanese. It is a world philosophy in its own right and deserves to be recognized as such. What was needed, then, was to "translate" philosophically his typically obscure ways of writing, so that those conversant with Western philosophy might have access to his particular perspective. To this day, I remain committed to making Nishida philosophically accessible.

To that end, Chapter 4 is most helpful. It situates Nishida's theory of experience, in philosophically cogent and intelligible language, within the wider philosophical discussion of experience. Traditionally, experience has been variously understood as "the foundation of knowledge" or "the foundation of ontology," as "life," or as "*Bildung*." Feenberg explains how Nishida's take on experience connects and disconnects with these various conceptions, situating it eventually in an ontological frame of reference, akin to a kind of existential phenomenology.

As I was grappling further with Nishida's theories, Andrew pointed out something disturbing in his politics and that of the Kyoto School in general. In the 1980s, a number of scholars of modern Japanese intellectual history, most notably the students of the Chicago School headed by H. D. Harootunian and Tetsuo Najita, produced a body of writings portraying the Kyoto School as "fascist." Nishida and the right-wing cronies in his circle were said to be philosophical advocates of Japanese Imperialism. I expressed my misgivings but had no solid basis for arguing against the criticisms. Andrew proposed that we find out for ourselves. I turned my attention to Nishida's political writings and surrounding debates like the *Chūokōron Roundtable*, and over the next several years we examined in detail Nishida's position against the historical background of the 1940s. I translated one of his well-known—or perhaps better, infamous—political essays, "The Principle of the New World Order" (1943) and analyzed the range of responses it provoked, from far left to far right. As it happened, the project was to become a focus of my dissertation. Together we examined in detail how Nishida's philosophy of nothingness and his political and cultural convictions might or might not be related to the issue of Japanese expansionism. Regardless of Nishida's own views, we wanted to assess the actual ramifications of his choice of words and their echoes in the imperialist vocabulary of the time. Did the choice of these words make him "complicit?" And if so, what becomes of his philosophical views? Should his proposal be viewed as *a* principle for *a* new world order? Or do the texts suggest that he actually meant to advance *the* definitive principle of *the* new order of things? The questions were not of the sort to be answered offhandedly.

Coming from the left, Feenberg started out from an extremely critical position. As we delved more deeply into the matter, it became clear that things were not so simple. Nishida was by no means a straightforward mouthpiece for the Japanese military regime. On the contrary, his philosophical interests and the claims he was trying to make in the turbulent and troubling times of the Pacific War were of a different order. They had to do rather with a philosophical assessment of the relationship between universalism and particularism as they related to nation-building. Nishida's political vision and his cultural hopes opposed Western imperialism and did so with an eye to overcoming the aims of world domination issuing from one part of the world. This perspective guided us through an analysis of Nishida's use of war slogans and his limited understanding of the actions of the Japanese Imperial Army. We assessed questions of contextualization and accountability. Chapter 2, "The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida," represents Feenberg's studied interpretation of the controversy through the lens of what he called an "alternative modernity" that motivated Nishida's political opposition to Western hegemony. I find it to be far and away one of the most sensible and illuminating of the writings analyzing the politics of the Kyoto School. His position is "slightly-left-moderate," far more complex than the philosophically thin ultra-left critiques and politically naïve right-leaning defenses of the Kyoto School.

The theme of "alternative modernity" continued to occupy a place in his primary field of interest, the philosophy of technology. Chapter 1, "Technology in a Global World," explores the tensions he sees between "pure rationality" and actual practice. Technology, Feenberg argues, is often thought to be based on a universal rationality embodied in mathematics, physics, and engineering, which is then set up in opposition to the particular cultures that employ it. A bridge built in Bolivia or in Borneo stands or falls on the same principles; it is "culturally independent." But is this dichotomy of rationality and culture tenable? Nishida developed a dialectical and ontological notion of "rationality" as culturally and historically concrete. What appears as "pure rationality" is only an abstraction. Rationality, or "logic," is always historically embodied for him and its "subjects" are always real persons engaged with others in dialectical developments taking place in a concrete but particular socio-political environment and history. If so, a technology that is born of rationality is also through and through a cultural, historical, and political phenomenon. If culture and history articulate specific modes of "doing things technologically," it cannot be said that that technology is culturally—or politically—neutral. (I would note that while Nishida himself did not develop this insight into an extended theory of technology, his student Miki Kiyoshi did.)

The opening Chapter also demonstrates that things that appear to us as "normal and self-justifying," such as the keyboard on which I am typing these words, need not have been so. And indeed, had computers been first invented in countries whose written languages make use of thousands of characters, it is more likely that the primary mode of input would have been voice-activated rather than finger-activated. Feenberg further explores interesting tensions between cultural specificity and its purportedly universal tools (such as technology), borrowing insights from Nishida's theory of dialectical history. Although not with specific reference to technology, Nishida, too, wrote extensively on philosophical universality, cultural particularity, and concrete subjectivity, as dialectically and mutually determining one another through the unfolding of history. Nishida's vision was to produce a culturally specific expression of philosophy that is nevertheless universal-*qua*-particular. In fact, there can be no other form. Even the supposedly universality of European philosophy is exposed as a historical particular. On the same reasoning, it would be theoretically and practically possible to have a culturally robust expression of technology arise within different regions of the globe, each with its own specificity, and yet be transferable or at least comprehensible to other regions, perhaps even globally in terms of its general equipmentality. When transplanted, such technology would probably take on other forms and meanings. In this way it is possible to think of a global framework for technology in a properly ontological sense.

Chapter 3, "Alternative Modernity? Playing the Japanese Game of Culture," takes up the theme of alternative modernity in a different context— through the 1951 novel of the Nobel laureate Kawabata Yasunari, *The Master of Go*. This is perhaps the most original essay in the collection. It is certainly one of the most fascinating literary analyses I have read on the transition in Japan from the fading dominance of tradition to a modern society.

In 1938 Kawabata was witness to a legendary Go match between an aged retiring Master and a young challenger. The Master plays the game in the traditional way, through what Nishida might describe as "acting-intuition," a way of becoming "one" with the game and the movement of the pieces on the board. The aesthetic of performance as both players engage in the dialectical construction of a beautiful and creative match, was held to be more significant than the final outcome of who wins and who loses. Such is the "art" of playing the game of Go. Who the players are, in what surroundings they are playing, what the relationship is between the opponents—all these belong to the creation of a well-played match.

The young challenger, however, introduces a "modern" method of efficiency into the picture, maneuvering aggressively with the intent to win. Stripped of its context and personal relationships, the game becomes about the rules and how they are used to achieve the goal: victory. The match lasted almost six months. The young challenger did not "understand" how a traditional, beautiful match was to be played. His attentions were all fixed on winning. At a turning point in the game, the challenger stalls to consider his next move. The Master is disturbed by this sabotage, which he takes to be a refusal to play properly, a lack of respect for the grand rule of game-making, and of course, a disregard for the opponent, all of which the older Master considered a violation of etiquette. In the end, the game went to the challenger. Kawabata perceived the loss of the Master and the defeat of his "way" as symbolic of the end of an era, the victory of modernity over tradition.

Feenberg's reflections elaborate on the tension between formal rules and their cultural context, not unlike the relationship between technology and culture. Although it is possible to extract the formal dimensions of a system, they remain cultural realities in a living context. The question then becomes how to express culturally concrete but universally available formal systems. The possibilities are manifold, but it is this "opening" of systems that enables the thought of alternative modernities. Feenberg concludes with an application of Lukács's theory of the novel to show how Kawabata's novel can be read as irony through the eyes of the novelist, such that the novel is not simply about nostalgia nor a straightforward critique of modernity. There is no return to the past, but what is to come arises out of the very tradition that one has transcended "from within." This is what makes the imagination of a new, alternate direction possible. As different as Kawabata's literary approach is from Nishida's philosophical aims, both are seen to grapple with this possibility of renewing tradition as a form of modern, yet not merely Western, global culture.

As time went on, my academic horizons were expanded to include critiques from orientalism, postcolonialism, anti-imperialism, race discourse, and intersectionality. I abandoned the simplistic "East-West" framework and learned to become suspicious of "essentialist" thinking. I came to understand the reasons for not always capitalizing *japan* and for setting "Japan" off in quotes when necessary. As a result, I developed mixed feelings towards old favorites like *Zen and Japanese Culture*, as I considered the reasons for rejecting the notion of "culture" altogether. I also came to appreciate Nishida as the ultimate anti-essentialist, or as having challenged the need to think in terms of essentialism and nonessentialism. Academic styles, of course, change over time, and I myself am only too glad that the cumbersome discourse of the 1990s is over. And yet, if there are real philosophical insights to be had, a way must be found to retain their significance through the passage of the years. The essays in this collection attest to the power of such timeless reflections.

Each of the essays in this book can stand on its own, just as they did when originally published. My hope is that readers can appreciate and enjoy these engagements by a keen philosophical mind as it articulates, from a global context, ideas present, if not always adequately thematized, in Japanese history. The fundamental issues, I am persuaded, are as current as they have ever been.

We never actually did get around to reading *Fundamental Problems* together. Had we done so, I have no doubt the results would have been as enlightening as anything a philosopher can hope for. I am grateful to my teacher and my friend, Andrew Feenberg, for the many years of stimulating philosophical conversations we shared and for his continued support in my own development.

Hannover, Germany
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