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Beyond “East and West”: Nishida’s Universalism and Postcolonial Critique

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Abstract

During the 1930s and 1940s, many Japanese intellectuals resisted Western cultural imperialism. This theoretical movement was unfortunately complicit with wartime nationalism. Kitaro Nishida, the founder of modern Japanese philosophy and the leading figure of the Kyoto School, has been the focus of a controversy as to whether his philosophy was inherently nationalist or not. Nishida’s defenders claim that his philosophical “universalism” was incompatible with the particularistic nationalism of Japan’s imperialist state. From the standpoint of postcolonial critique, I argue that this defense is insufficient. Philosophical universalism is not in itself anti-imperialist, but can in fact contribute to imperialist ideology.

Beyond “East and West”: Nishida’s Universalism and Postcolonial Critique

1. Eurocentrism and Japanese Philosophy

For a century, Asian intellectual and cultural life has been inordinately preoccupied with the meanings and implications of “Westernization” and “modernization.” Japan sidestepped this problem during its long years of isolation,¹ but finally in 1853 Commodore Perry and his cannon-wielding “black ships” came to the shores of Yokohama and demanded the opening of the country. At that point the country faced two alternatives--either become a victim of Western expansionism, or modernize in order to protect itself. Japan chose the latter path, and with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, it inaugurated an era of daunting modernization in all aspects of life--social, intellectual, technological, political, economic, religious, aesthetic, and of course, in popular culture.

It is not an exaggeration to say that the history of post-Meiji Japan has been a history of the struggle with the notions of Westernization and modernization. At first, aversion to the “barbarians” caused public outcry against any foreign influence. However, as the political leaders of the new government actively promoted the idea of building a new, modern country and getting rid of old feudal ways, people in the cosmopolitan centers began to embrace the new way of life with enthusiasm. Soon infatuation with things Western was extreme; for instance, one group of reformers proposed to convert the Japanese emperor to Christianity, since that was the religion under which science had developed in the West. Beef-eating became popular, and the local authorities issued a public notice “recommending this unorthodox diet on the ground that it would create energy for the performance of patriotic duties and strengthen the national physique.”² “Perry kawara-ban,” an ornamental tile depicting the “beautiful” black ships, became a sought-after *objet d’art* among the fashionable. “Red Hair” prints, depicting northern Europeans and their lifestyles and technologies, became popular as well. Western style dance halls became the craze among the forward-looking modern types.

Viewing the world in terms of “East vs. West” (*toyo vs. seiyō*) became a deeply ingrained practice in almost all aspects of life; it was the framework people used to understand their rapidly changing and often chaotic lives. Cutting across class and gender lines, people became keenly aware of their “non-Western” way of life vis-a-vis what they imagined to be “the Western,” the “foreign,” the “new” way of life. The process of negotiating with the West manifested itself in myriad ways: Political elites debated how to construct a modern nation-state called Japan; education reformers had to reconsider the balance between the traditional and the scientific so as to cope with the bombardment of new knowledge; women and men alike were suddenly faced with the problem of self-presentation--clothing, hairstyle, and possessions were transparent markers of their stake

¹ From 1639 to the mid-1850s, the Tokugawa Shogunate isolated Japan from nearly all foreign contact in order chiefly to control the spread of Christianity; only the strictly controlled port of Nagasaki was open to continue trading with China and Holland. After 1653, no Japanese could travel abroad, and all Japanese who lived abroad were prohibited from returning.

² G. B. Samsom, *The Western World and Japan* (Tokyo: Charles Tuttle Co., 1984), p. 383.

in the cultural transformation, both to others and to themselves.³ The initial shock of “difference” established a long-standing paradigm of “Japan as the other of the West.”

While some thinkers, such as Yukichi Fukuzawa, fully embraced the Western notions of liberalism and democracy, the rapid process of modernization/Westernization also provoked a strong traditionalist reaction. Although Japan was already cut off from its premodern past (represented as “Eastern”), cultural conservatives actively promoted traditions many of which they had to put together from remnants of the old way of life. For example, Takamori Saigo, a major political figure in the Meiji Restoration, was known for his antforeign beliefs and his praise of the “spirit of the samurai.” He eventually led a tradition-centered rebellion against the very modernizing regime he had helped to create. Japanese calligraphy, using the traditional brush, which had been chased from the educational curriculum as outmoded, was re-introduced in order to “preserve the spirit of Japanese style and thinking.” Buddhism was reformed and modernized, and new martial arts such as judo were constructed from traditional elements. The result of this modernization process was a peculiar combination of rapid Westernization and a rather artificial return to imagined origins. The hopeful intellectuals echoed the sentiment epitomized in Shozan Sakuma’s slogan: “Eastern morality and Western techniques.”

Japanese philosophy was born in this general cultural milieu, and it was by no means an exception to this trend. What came to be identified as “philosophy” in Japan-- “Western” philosophy as opposed to Confucianism and Buddhism which were increasingly regarded as feudalistic--was introduced around the time of the Meiji Restoration.⁴ At first Japanese thinkers concentrated on exegesis and commentary on Western philosophers. However, as they became more aware of the fruitful tension between “Western rationality” and “traditional Japanese values,” philosophy became a site in which Japanese intellectuals negotiated their relation to European intellectual trends.

In the European consciousness of the time, the “West” represented the “universal”; the age-old quest of philosophy has been to find the “truth” which speaks to *the* human mind, just as scientific knowledge is considered “universal.”⁵ Moreover, as exemplified by Hegel, the dominant view of history is represented as a temporally linear “progress,” from the pre-modern past to the modern present, culminating in the techno-scientific culture of Europe and America.⁶ Since both philosophy and science developed chiefly in Europe, the notions of “truth,” “universality,” “modernity,” and “being Western” often came to be conflated in the minds of philosophers, both Japanese and Western. In this framework, what was “non-Western” was either simply “false,” or due to a particular “time lag” within

³ For instance, women wearing dresses, as opposed to the traditional *kimonos*, were “modern.” The choices in daily life--anything from umbrellas, shoes, furniture, eating utensils, hairstyle--reflected one’s position in the process of the assimilation of things Western.

⁴ Funayama Shinichi dates the introduction of Western philosophy to Japan in 1862, when Nishi Amane and Tsuda Mamichi went to Holland and brought back Comte and Mill’s utilitarianism. Shinichi Funayama, *Hêgeru Tetsugaku to Nishida Tetsugaku (Hegel’s Philosophy and Nishida’s Philosophy)*, (Tokyo: Mirai-sha, 1984), p. 107. See also Ryôsuke Ohashi, *Nihon-teki na mono, Yôroppa-teki na mono (Things Japanese, Things European)*, (Tokyo: Shinchô-sensho, 1992), Chapter 2. Nishi is credited with coining many philosophical terms in Japanese, including the term “*tetsugaku*” (philosophy).

⁵ Of course, ethnocentric discourse is not limited to Europe. China, for instance, has had a long tradition of understanding itself to be the “center” of the world; however, this consciousness was already eroding with the arrival of the British and the Opium Wars since 1839.

⁶ Less dominant views of history included, for example, the romantic conception of Rousseau which represented history not as “progress” but as “decline.”

the universal scheme of things. The central reference point remained the West--hence, the familiar problem of "Eurocentrism."

As is well-known, American intellectuals have recently begun to criticize their own Eurocentric representation of intellectual history and to pay closer attention to the different voices at the margins of this intellectual mapping. The critique of Eurocentrism has gone along with a new appreciation of "multiculturalism" and a wider self-understanding in the context of global history. However, despite such efforts, Eurocentrism does remain a persistent reality, both in the United States and elsewhere, Western as well as non-Western. As Dipesh Chakrabarty laments, "That Europe works as a silent referent in historical knowledge itself becomes obvious in a highly ordinary way...Third-world historians feel a need to refer to works in European history; historians of Europe do not feel any need to reciprocate."⁷

What is significant about Japanese *philosophy* in this context is its self-positioning vis-a-vis Western universalism. The idea was that Japan, as a non-Western nation, could provide something "universal" of its own, the truth of which the West could recognize. As Nishida optimistically claimed,

Up to now Westerners thought that their culture was superior to all others, and that human culture advances toward their own form. Other peoples, such as Easterners, are said to be behind and if they advance, they too will acquire the same form. There are even some Japanese who think like this. However...I believe there is something fundamentally different about the East. They [East and West] must complement each other and...achieve the eventual realization of a complete humanity. It is the task of Japanese culture to find such a principle.⁸

Japanese philosophy could not be reduced to Eastern spirituality, a mere particularity, since it too could validate itself in terms of rational universality. In Nishida's words, "To become global Oriental culture must not stop at its own specificity but rather it must shed a new light on Western culture and a new world culture must be created,"⁹ and further, "Today's Japan is no longer a closed society, an island in the East. It is a Japan in the world. The principle of the formation of Japan should reflect the principle of the formation of the world."¹⁰ The West no longer had a monopoly on universal culture. Japanese philosophy exemplified the claim that history does not "culminate" in European civilization; instead history would have to recognize multiple centers, all of which had claims to being just as valid as the West. Hence, Nishida's thought gave voice to the cultural ambivalence people felt at the time, that somehow Japan was "different" but not thereby "worse" than or "behind" the West. Japanese philosophy represented one of the earliest formulations of anti-Eurocentrism.

2. Universalism and Nationalism: Kitaro Nishida's Case

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992), p. 25.

⁸ Nishida's works are collected in *Nishida Kitaro Zenshu (Collected Works of Nishida)*, vols. 1-19 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1987-1989) which will be abbreviated as *NKZ* and followed by the volume number. This quote is from a lecture "Nihon Bunka no Mondai" (The Problem of Japanese Culture), *NKZ 14*, pp. 404-405. For a good discussion of Nishida's conception of modernity, see Andrew Feenberg, *Alternative Modernity: The Technical Turn in Philosophy and Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), Chapter 8.

⁹ *NKZ 14*, p. 407.

¹⁰ *NKZ 12*, p. 341.

Japanese philosophy is said to find its own voice with the publication of Kitaro Nishida's *Zen no Kenkyu (An Inquiry into the Good, 1911)*.¹¹ Influenced by William James' concept of "pure experience," Nishida initially attempted to articulate an experiential ontology of immediate experience¹² partially inspired by Zen Buddhism.¹³ He presented his early philosophy as a "synthesis of Western and Eastern thinking." What was "Western" was his method; he deliberately chose the language of Western philosophy, borrowing from Aristotle, neo-Kantianism, German idealism, and in his later writings, Hegelian Marxism. What was "Eastern" was his inclusion of the concept of "absolute nothingness" (*zettai-mu*) derived from Buddhist metaphysics. This hybrid trope became standard in the "Kyoto School,"¹⁴ which established itself as the dominant philosophical school after the 1920s. All major thinkers after that time either belonged to the Kyoto School, or as in the case of Marxists and neo-Kantians, responded polemically to it. What is known as Japanese philosophy today in the West largely represents the legacy of the Kyoto School.

Despite its initial, seemingly apolitical, philosophical stance, the Kyoto School became entangled in politics during the 1930s and 1940s when a wave of nationalist sentiment swept the country. Then the critique of Eurocentrism took a distinctively nationalist turn. The chief concern of Japanese intellectuals at the time was to theorize a specifically Japanese form of modernity that would remedy the defects of a Euro-American model driven by rationalism, materialism, technocentrism, and the will to domination. Japan was supposed to be uniquely suited to develop such an alternative modernity, since it was the only nation in Asia to modernize successfully while retaining the spirit of the East. Several series of roundtable discussions and symposia on this theme were held in the early 1940s, the most infamous of which was the "Overcoming Modernity" (*kindai no chokoku*) debate of 1942¹⁵ in which some of Nishida's students participated. Iwao Koyama, for instance, developed a "philosophy of world history" based on Nishida's thought, as an answer to Western imperialism. In order to fight

¹¹ *Zen no Kenkyu* is *NKZ 1*. For an English translation, see *An Inquiry into the Good*, Masao Abe and Christopher Ives, trans. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987).

¹² For a discussion of the theory of pure experience, see Feenberg, A. and Y. Arisaka, "Experiential Ontology: The Origins of the Nishida Philosophy in the Doctrine of Pure Experience." *International Philosophical Quarterly* 30 (1990: 2) pp. 173-205.

¹³ Robert Sharf argues that the kind of Zen which emphasizes "immediacy," such as D. T. Suzuki's writings, is a post-Meiji construct already driven by nationalism. For analyses see Sharf's "Zen and Japanese Nationalism," *History of Religions* 33 (1993: 1) pp. 1-43, and "Whose Zen? Zen Nationalism Revisited," in *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School, & the Question of Nationalism*, John Maraldo and James Heisig, eds. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995). See also Bernard Faure's critique, "The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism," in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*, Charles Wei-shun Fu and Steven Heine, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

¹⁴ The broad rubric of "Kyoto School" (*Kyoto Gakuha*) includes Nishida and his colleagues and students, such as Hajime Tanabe, Tetsuro Watsuji, Keiji Nishitani, Iwao Koyama, Masaaki Kosaka, Torataro Shimomura, and Shigetaka Suzuki. The term "Kyoto School" was first used by Jun Tosaka, a Marxist student of Nishida's, in order to designate the right-wing thought which developed in the early 1930s.

¹⁵ The debate was initially published in *Bungakukai* (Literary World), 1942; for the texts and commentary, see T. Kawakami, et al., *Kindai no Chokoku* (Tokyo: Fuzanbo, 1990). For commentary, see also Wataru Hiromatsu, '*Kindai no Chokoku*' Ron (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1989). Discussions in English include H. D. Harootunian, "Visible Discourse/Invisible Ideologies," in *Postmodernism in Japan*, M. Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 63-92, and Ryoen Minamoto, "The Symposium on 'Overcoming Modernity'" in *Rude Awakenings*, pp. 197-229.

Western domination, Japan had to offer some non-Eurocentric “principle” which could unify Asia and establish a new world order.¹⁶ As such, it was Japan’s responsibility to “free Asia from Western colonial powers” so that it could develop a modern global culture equal to or even better than the model hitherto established by the West. As anyone familiar with the nationalist discourse of the day can easily recognize, this rhetoric coincided with the slogans of the imperialist regime.

After the war, progressive leftists harshly criticized the debate for its reactionary agenda, its complicity with nationalism, and its justification of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere. The debate was cast into oblivion, at least during the years following the war, and the Kyoto School acquired an unsavory imperialist image. During the postwar period, just the mention of “Nishida” or the Kyoto School would have made one appear complicit with imperialism, and the intellectual community shunned their philosophy as politically evil. However, the followers of the Kyoto School continued to maintain its tradition of religious philosophy somewhat in isolation. They believed that their philosophy was not inherently nationalist despite its problematic associations, and that it was the only original thought ever to appear in Japanese philosophy, and as such, still worth pursuing.

The assessment of Nishida’s own role in this debate is far from clear. He did not participate in the debate nor did he explicitly support the nationalist regime, but his philosophy is held accountable for many of the politically problematic concepts his students employed. However, Nishida did not explicitly state his political views but rather buried them in complicated philosophical theories, so the evaluation of his politics has given rise to an intense controversy in the postwar years. His writings were so coded and cryptic that interpreters used them to support politically opposing views.¹⁷

Nishida developed his metaphysical theories during the late 1920s and 1930s, when Japanese military and political leaders were mobilizing the whole nation with full-blown nationalism. He was by then a well-known figure, and his books were widely read. However, until he began to write on history during the mid 1930s, he had concentrated primarily on abstract metaphysical theory with little reference to politics. As a result, his philosophy was attacked by Marxists for lacking real historical significance. For instance, Nishida’s Marxist student, Jun Tosaka, denounced his teacher’s philosophy as an “academic, bourgeois philosophy of idealism” that is “trans-historical, formalistic, romantic, and phenomenological.”¹⁸ Nishida’s letters indicate that he began to write on

¹⁶ Jeffrey Herf’s concept of “reactionary modernism” is useful for understanding Japanese philosophers’ reaction to Western rationality from the 1920s to the end of the War. (Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). The works of the German reactionary modernists—such as Ernst Juenger, Oswald Spengler, Werner Sombart, and Carl Schmitt—were introduced to the Japanese audience through young Japanese philosophers who went to Germany in the 1920s and 30s. German nationalists believed that Germany could meaningfully combine technical rationality and spirit, since Germans were supposedly uniquely cultured in a way the Anglo-Americans and French were not. Many pro-modern Japanese intellectuals were also strongly nationalistic and hoped to create a specifically Asian modernity in Japan. They rejected Western imperialism while trying to coopt Western rationality for their project.

¹⁷ For a more detailed analysis of the debate, see Yoko Arisaka, “The Nishida Enigma: ‘The Principle of the New World Order,’” *Monumenta Nipponica* 51: (1996:1), pp. 81-105. For a collection of essays on the politics of the Kyoto School, see *Rude Awakenings*.

¹⁸ Masakatsu Fujita, “Nihon ni Okeru Kenkyushi no Genjo” (An Overview of the History of Research [of Nishida] in Japan), in *Nishida Tetsugaku: Shin Shiryo to Keyu e no Tebiki*, Y. Kayano and R. Ohashi, eds. (Kyoto: Minerva Shobo, 1987), p. 118. At that time, Nishida accepted this criticism (see his letter to Tosaka, #749, *NKZ* 18, p. 460).

politics in the late 1930s, partly in response to such criticism, and partly to show his concern for the issues of the day. His writings soon touched on such subjects as the Imperial House, the project of WWII, Japanese National Polity (*kokutai*), and the role of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.¹⁹

According to his many postwar critics,²⁰ Nishida is guilty of complicity with imperialism or ultranationalism because not only did he employ the nationalist discourse of the time, but he also gave it philosophical meaning in essays such as “The Principle of the New World Order” (1942) and “The Problem of Japanese Culture” (1940).²¹ For example, regarding the concept of “*hakko iu*” (Eight corners, one world),²² a wartime slogan, Nishida claims;

Each nation/people lives its own unique historical life and at the same time joins in a united global world through carrying out a world-historical mission. This is the ultimate Idea [principle] of human historical development, and this is the principle of the New World Order that should be sought in the current world war. It seems that our country’s principle, “Eight corners, one world,” expresses this idea. I humbly believe that this view is also expressed by the imperial statement proclaiming that all nations should understand this principle.²³

Pierre Lavelle points out that ideas such as this put Nishida squarely in the camp of the ultranationalists, in their justification of the self-appointed leadership of Japan in Asia.²⁴ The language of “respecting the historical lives of each nation,” while it sounds good, was itself a part of imperialist discourse.²⁵ Nishida further comments on the Japanese national polity (*kokutai*) and the Imperial Way (*kodo*):

Japan’s national polity is not merely totalitarianism. The Imperial House is the beginning and the end of the world, as the absolute present that embraces the past and the future. The quintessence of the unbroken line of our national polity consists in the completion of the historical world itself with the Imperial House as its center.²⁶

¹⁹ See, for instance, his essay “Sekai Shin Chitsujo no Genri” (“The Principle of the New World Order”), *NKZ 12*: 426-434. For an English translation, see Arisaka.

²⁰ The critics, largely representing the intellectual historians of modern Japan, include H. D. Harootunian, Tetsuo Najita, John Dower, Robert Sharf, Peter Dale, Bernard Faure, and Pierre Lavelle. See especially Lavelle’s “The Political Thought of Nishida Kitaro,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 49 (1994: 2), pp. 141-162.

²¹ Excerpts from “The Problem of Japanese Culture” are translated in *Sources of the Japanese Tradition*, vol 2, W. T. de Bary, ed. and trans. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958). Both the “New World Order” essay and “The Problem of Japanese Culture” are included in *NKZ 12*.

²² “*Hakko iu*,” or more typically “*hakko ichiu*,” was used to justify Japanese expansionism. The phrase was taken from *Nihon Shoki*. It is also translated as “All the world as one family,” or “The universal harmony.”

²³ *NKZ 12*, p. 428. Arisaka, p 102.

²⁴ Lavelle, p. 160.

²⁵ One of the items of the declaration at the Great East Asia Meeting reads: “Each nation of the Great East Asia should respect each other’s tradition and each people should promote each other’s creativity in order to enhance the culture of Great East Asia.” (Kenryo Sato, *Dai Towa Senso Kaikoroku*, Tokyo: Tokuma Shoten, 1966, p. 318). The meeting was held in 1943 in order to strengthen the coherence of the Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere under the auspices of Tojo. Nishida’s “The Principle of the New World Order” was initially conceived at the request of the Tojo military government in preparation for this meeting. For detailed discussions of the circumstances, see Michiko Yusa, “Fashion and A-letheia,” in *Hikaku Shiso Kenkyu* 16 (1990), pp. 281-294; Hikaru Furuta, “‘Sekai Shin Chitsujo no Genri’ Jiken-ko, I and II,” (*NKZ 14 and 19*, inserts); and Hisashi Ueda, *Zoku Sofu Nishida Kitaro* (Tokyo: Nansosha, 1983).

²⁶ *NKZ 12*, p. 430. Arisaka, 102.

In light of such blatantly nationalist ideas, it seems hardly possible to defend Nishida. However, others insist on more nuanced analyses of these passages in a wider philosophical and historical context, especially since his letters and diaries clearly demonstrate his anti-imperialist sentiments.²⁷ Moderates in the debate, such as Jan Van Bragt, hold that while there is evidence of theoretical complicity, nationalism was not the fundamental inspiration of Nishida and other figures of the Kyoto School.²⁸ John Maraldo also argues that Nishida did not intend to support state nationalism, although he was complicit “more by effect than intention” and thus should still be held responsible.²⁹ Andrew Feenberg examines the application of his “dialectic of place” to history and acknowledges that it has a strong cosmopolitan implications,³⁰ a point Nishida’s defenders emphasize.

For these defenders, Nishida’s cosmopolitanism derives from a universalistic philosophy which excludes nationalism on principle despite his concessions to the regime.³¹ Hence, they argue that the accusation that Nishida was complicit with ultranationalism is unwarranted. What I argue in the last section is that the chief claim of the defenders--that Nishida’s philosophical “universalism” is incompatible with nationalist ideology--fails because universalist discourse was used both as a tool of liberation *and* oppression in Japan’s case. How does Nishida apply his universalistic philosophy of place to history?

Nishida’s signature theory of “place” (“*basho*”) is a system of “concrete universals,” which explains the “conditions” of abstract thought.³² All of the categories which appear in this system are universals such as “judgment,” “consciousness,” “action,” “historical world,” and “absolute nothingness.” The theory is modelled after Hegel’s logic, which is meant to be a universal system of reality as such and not the expression of a *particular* nation. What makes this theory distinctively non-Western, despite its universal form, is the last stage of absolute nothingness (*zettai mu*). If the whole history of Western philosophy is a history of objectified Being, then absolute nothingness is the “place” of such Being. This utterly non-objectifiable “place” is the ultimate non-reifiable “that in which” all beings manifest themselves; it cannot be objectified, for if it were, it would simply be another “being” and not the “place” of being. As such, it does not appear in the (Western) system of metaphysics. Insofar as the place of nothingness “encompasses” the metaphysics of Being, it is an ultimate universal under which all categories are subsumed.

²⁷ On Nishida’s personal writings, see Michiko Yusa, “Fashion and *A-letheia*,” and “Nishida and the Question of Nationalism,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 46 (1991: 2), pp. 203-209, and “Nishida and Totalitarianism: A Philosopher’s Resistance,” in *Rude Awakenings*.

²⁸ Jan Van Bragt, “Kyoto School Philosophy--Intrinsically Nationalist?” in *Rude Awakenings*, pp. 233-254.

²⁹ John Maraldo, “The Problem of World Culture: Towards an Appropriation of Nishida’s Philosophy of Nation and Culture,” *Eastern Buddhist* 27: (1995: 2), pp. 183-197.

³⁰ Andrew Feenberg, “The Problem of Modernity in the Philosophy of Nishida,” in *Rude Awakenings*, pp. 151-173.

³¹ For the universalist implications of this aspect of Nishida’s thought, see Shizuteru Ueda, “Nishida, Nationalism, and the War in Question” and Michiko Yusa, “Nishida and Totalitarianism: A Philosopher’s Resistance,” both in *Rude Awakenings*. The followers of the Kyoto School today generally agree on the defensive voice represented by these essays.

³² For Nishida’s theory of “place,” see his works from 1926-1937, primarily *NKZ 4-7* and other essays. In English, see Feenberg, *Alternative Modernity*, Chapter 8; Masao Abe, “Nishida’s Philosophy of ‘Place,’” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28 (1988: 4), pp. 355-371; and Robert Wargo, *The Logic of Basho and the Concept of Nothingness in the Philosophy of Nishida Kitaro* (Doctoral Dissertation, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan UMI 73-11291, 1972).

Nishida applies his concept of absolute nothingness historically. At the ultimate historical stage, absolute nothingness appears not as the goal of a temporal progression ordered in terms of premodern to modern, but as a spatialized realization of all of cultures in a global “place.” All cultures interact to create their own identity vis-a-vis each other in his dialectical theory of “the identity of contradictions.” Nishida opposes the “undialectical” conception of national self-determination of 19th Century Western imperialism: “Each nation considered that its historical mission was to strengthen itself by subjugating others.”³³ He contrasts this view with his own dialectical “formative globalism” which calls for the self-realization and self-transcendence of nations/peoples. In this view, “each nation develops itself, yet at the same time it must negate itself and reach beyond itself to participate in building a global world.”³⁴ Each nation must have a “world historical mission,” which seeks the preservation of the identity of the nation *and* forms a global community through mutual co-determination and self-negation.

In this view, the West is not a privileged center of world culture, but just another particular site in which certain forms of civilization developed. By “spatializing” global history, that is, by treating the world as the place of nations’ historical co-determination and self-transcendence, Nishida includes non-European spheres as full participants in the realization of global history. All other cultures have different ways of participating in world culture which are no less valid than the European forms. The “new world order” therefore must involve all nations coming to a dialectical self-understanding in these global terms, and the historical mission of Japan is to further that process. This theory is “postmodern” to the extent that it destabilizes the Eurocentric conception of history and culture and makes each cultural formation and identity a matter of interaction and co-determination rather than assuming essentialized entities.³⁵ If cultural identities are formed through *difference*, i.e., through the identity of contradictions, then there cannot be any “center” which would dominate others. But if so, Japanese nationalism itself would be excluded.

In fact, Nishida explicitly opposed the ethnocentric and totalitarian interpretation of the official policy. For example, he states,

What is most deplorable is to subjectivize Japan. That merely militarizes the Imperial Way and transforms it into imperialism...In contrast we must contribute to the world by discovering our own principle of self-formation in the depth of our historical development; that principle is the identity of contradictions. This is the authentic Imperial Way and the true meaning of “Eight corners, one roof.”³⁶

In “The Principle of the New World Order,” Nishida further states that “Mere racialism, which lacks true globalism and envisions the world only from its own self-centered perspective, is ethnic egoism; only expansionism and imperialism can result from it.”³⁷

These passages may indicate that he was distancing his own philosophical position from state nationalist ideology.

³³ NKZ 12, p. 427. Arisaka p. 100.

³⁴ NKZ 12, p. 428. Arisaka p. 101.

³⁵ For a “postmodern” reading of Nishida, see Kojin Karatani, “The Discursive Space of Modern Japan” in *Japan in the World*, M. Miyoshi and H. D. Harootunian, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), and Yujiro Nakamura, *Nishida Tetsugaku no Datsukochiku* (Deconstruction in/of Nishida’s Philosophy), (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1993).

³⁶ NIZ 12, p. 341.

³⁷ NKZ 12, p. 432-433. Arisaka p. 104.

To explain Nishida's embarrassing references to such imperialist notions as "*hakko iu*" and the Great East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, the defenders claim that Nishida used the language of the day in the hopes that the political leaders would be influenced by his own anti-imperialist interpretation of it.³⁸ Moreover, even with respect to Nishida's claim that *Japan* (in particular the Imperial House [*kôshitsu*]) offers the paradigm of cultural co-determination (which contradicts his own "no-center" view), the defenders argue that in his theory the words "Japan" or the "Imperial House" cannot refer to a *particular entity*, a "being," since they represent his philosophical concept of "absolute nothingness" as the "field" or "place" [*basho*] in which all nations co-exist dialectically. In other words, Japan is *not* one of these nations which interact, but in fact an empty "scene" in which all others work out their mutual existence. It is truly "universal" since it is not in any sense a "particular"; it enfolds all being. If so, Japanese nationalism is again impossible, since the Imperial House is not an "entity" which could exert a force on others. The defenders thus claim that Nishida was not a nationalist, neither as a person nor as a philosopher, since his philosophy cannot theoretically accommodate nationalism. If every nation followed his thought, no nation could fall into the sort of nationalism which embraces expansionism.

3. Nishida, Orientalism, and Postcolonialism

The notion of "absolute nothingness" in the theory of place is conveniently invoked to undercut the claim that the Japanese Imperial House is an "entity" which dominates the rest of the world. Strange as this theory sounds today, the idea that a particular nation may be the bearer of a universal principle, such as freedom or democracy, and that, therefore, its actions in history serve a higher end, should be familiar from recent American experience. However, leaving aside historical parallels, there is obviously a problem with this theory given the *actual* imperialist expansion of Japan into East Asia. I would like to address this issue in the context of Nishida's "orientalism" and its relation to postcolonial critique.

Since its publication in 1978, Edward Said's *Orientalism* profoundly changed the way the issues related to "East and West" are discussed. Said's main thesis is that the very category of the "Orient" was a European invention produced in order to "contain difference"³⁹ in the era of colonial expansion. Either by way of rejection or exoticism, the category "Orient" served as a tool for Europeans to bring under control the hitherto unknown "other" of Europe; it is by definition a part of European imperialism. The "Orient" was a sweeping category applied to Asiatic cultures regardless of the differences among them. So despite its apparent anti-Eurocentrism, boosting the "Orient" (and likewise the "East") is in fact very much parasitic on Eurocentrism, and the whole framework only reinscribes the fact that the point of reference still remains Europe. What is called for, in Said's view, is to put to rest these very categories: "if it [his discussion] eliminates the 'Orient' and 'Occident' altogether, then we shall have advanced a little in the process of what Raymond Williams has called the 'unlearning' of 'the inherent dominative mode.'"⁴⁰ By contrast, in confronting the West Japan "reverse-orientalized"

³⁸ For the discussions of Nishida's "semantic struggle" with the official doctrine, see Ueda and Yusa above in *Rude Awakenings*.

³⁹ See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Routledge, 1978), pp. 1-28.

⁴⁰ Said p. 28. For criticisms of Said, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* (New York: Verso, 1992).

itself in order to assert its identity as the “other,” thus retaining the Western reference point.

Seen from this perspective, Nishida’s theory is orientalist in that he had a vision of creating a “Japanese” philosophy which would offer something unique to the world. However, as we noted, what appealed to Nishida about philosophy was its ability to speak a universal language. It was precisely against the backdrop of this philosophical universalism that Nishida was able to assert the specificity of Japanese philosophy vis-a-vis the West.⁴¹ Yet, he wanted Japan’s contribution to share in the universality of Western thought. He thus had to adopt the language of Western philosophy, precisely because Japanese thought could not have been *recognized* by the West as of universal significance if it did not “speak their language.” Given the choice between “speaking a purely Japanese philosophical language and being ignored” and “speaking in a universal philosophical language and being recognized,” Nishida chose the latter.

Moreover, the very drive for universality which Nishida maintained throughout is itself a product of the Western metaphysics which postmodernism criticizes so harshly. The “grand narrative” is the phantasmic child of modernism. According to this view, Nishida’s “logic of place” is as Western as Hegel’s system, regardless of its “non-Western” flavor. But all this would have been fairly innocuous had it remained just a theoretical issue. The problem is that Nishida’s universalist theory became unintentionally implicated in Japanese imperialism, thereby ominously betokening the most pernicious aspect of Eurocentrism--the problem of colonialism. This is not to suggest that colonialism is inherently European; but Japanese imperialism was certainly modelled after and motivated by the modern colonial empires of the European nations (in particular the British, French, and Dutch endeavors in Asia). What I would like to address is the particular way in which Nishida’s philosophy became entangled with this brand of colonialism.

Recent studies in postcolonial critique have analyzed the relation between the colonized consciousness and its oppressor, the European colonizing consciousness. Postcolonial critique may be traced back to Frantz Fanon’s books, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), which thematized the ways in which European imperialism systematically enslaved the culture and consciousness of the colonized. But the full blown postcolonial critique began in 1982 with a group of Indian intellectuals who established the journal, *Subaltern Studies*, and theorized their colonized subjectivities vis-a-vis their colonizer, Great Britain.⁴²

Some of the main theoretical concerns of this group were to understand how the colonizing power, despite its “good intentions” of “modernizing India,” systematically warped the thinking of the colonized subjects to the advantage of the imperialist administration. The way this often worked was by convincing the colonized that, since

⁴¹ As Naoki Sakai observes, “Japan’s uniqueness and identity are provided insofar as Japan stands out as a particular object in the universal field of the West. Only when it is integrated into Western universalism does it gain its own identity as a particularity...But this is nothing but the positioning of Japan’s identity in Western terms which in return establishes the centrality of the West as the universal point of reference.” Naoki Sakai, “Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism” in *Postmodernism and Japan*, p. 105.

⁴² For a brief history of *Subaltern Studies*, see Chakrabarty, and also Gyan Prakash, “Writing Post-Colonialist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 32 (1990: 2): pp. 383-408.

modernity liberates nations and their peoples, the British ruled them “for their own good.” Many Indians were convinced and began to see their own culture as “backwards” and the “new” and “European” form of life as “better” and more “cosmopolitan.” The real power of colonization is to achieve this willing participation by transforming the colonized subjects’ own point of reference from the native culture to the Western one. But what this process did was to rob Indians of their own voice. The point of the critique, then, is to save the “subaltern,” the oppressed subjects under British imperialism, by theoretically empowering them, using Marxism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and an analysis of power based on Foucault, exposing the ways in which their own thinking was systematically subjugated by imperialism.⁴³

Postcolonialism opened a space in which to critique the hegemonic workings of the colonizing power. However, current postcolonial studies primarily focus on the Indian or African cases where the relation between the colonizer and the colonized more or less overlaps with the West/non-West. The case is much more complex in East Asia: all of the Asian nations were threatened by the imperialism of the West; within this solidarity vis-a-vis the West, however, Japan became a colonizer itself; Korea, Taiwan, and other South Asian nations were fully colonized by the Japanese, while China was partially colonized. So “colonized consciousness” in East Asia is not at all a unified experience, and is much more conflicted than the colonized consciousness of India or Africa under Europe.⁴⁴ Korean and Taiwanese women in the 1940s, for instance, were triply oppressed by the Japanese, by the West, and by those of their own men who became accomplices of the imperialist power.

It is within this context that I would like to return to Nishida’s philosophy of world history and its claim to universality. Here we must look at the two positions Japan occupied in the 1930s and 1940s. First there is Japan’s position vis-a-vis the West. While Japan was never colonized by the West, the effect the West had on Japanese consciousness resembles its effect on a colonized country. What is “Western” becomes the point of reference, even in the creation of an indigenous theory. As we noted, Nishida’s theory sought to validate the universality of all non-Western cultures against the domination of the West. It was primarily intended to be a theory of liberation. But to develop such an overarching theory, Nishida necessarily had to adopt Western philosophy, thereby “Westernizing” Japanese philosophy. In fact, with respect to human rights, some sort of Westernizing universalism has been an essential vehicle in many nations’ successful struggle for decolonization. Nishida’s cosmopolitan appreciation of the multiplicity of cultures can be seen as emancipating in that light.

At the same time, Japan occupied a very different position vis-a-vis other nations in East Asia. This is the problem: the very universalism which is presented as the vehicle

⁴³ For representative thoughts on postcolonialism, see Homi Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *The Post-Colonial Reader*, B. G. Ashcroft Griffiths and H. Tiffin, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1995). For a scathing criticism of postcolonialism in general, see Russel Jacoby, “Marginal Returns: The Trouble with Post-Colonial Theory,” *Lingua Franca* (September/October 1995), pp. 30-37.

⁴⁴ The theme of colonialism and postcolonialism in East Asia has been the working project of “Colonialism and Modernity: The Cases of Korea, China, and Japan” (spring 1995), sponsored by the University of California Humanities Research Institute. I wish to thank the organizers and the members of this group who introduced me to many of the ideas discussed in this paper.

of liberation became a tool of oppression when it was implicated in Japan's own colonizing endeavor in Asia. Just as European modernity was claimed to have liberating power in India because it was believed to raise India to the level of universal (i.e., European) culture, so Nishida optimistically believed that Japanese philosophy could help liberate Asian nations by raising them to universality. In Asia, Japan was the bearer of "truth," because of the unique non-dominating metaphysics of "place as nothingness" expressed in the Imperial Way. This belief in theoretical universalism eclipsed the understanding of Japan's historically contingent position and made it impossible for Nishida to evaluate Japan's Asian war realistically. He himself did not endorse colonialism, but his theory nevertheless *functioned* formally in a similar way to the way European universalism was used to convince colonized subjects to submit to imperialism. In fact, the ideologized slogan of Japanese imperialism was precisely to "free Asia from Western imperialism," while the reality was simply just another brutal colonialism. So even though Nishida personally steered clear of the militarist regime, his theory was useful to that regime to the extent that it replayed aspects of the universalist discourse of Western imperialism.

The category of the "East" (or "Asian unity" in the language of the Japanese imperialists) was pernicious precisely because it weakened the perception that Japan was a colonizer, a brutal force *against* other Asian nations, in favor of promoting the perception of unity vis-a-vis the West. Japan appointed itself to be the leader of this Asian unity, since it was, again, the bearer of truth as well as being most "modern." As Nishida claims, Up to now, East Asian peoples have been oppressed under European imperialism and regarded as colonies. We were robbed of our world-historical mission. It is now time for East Asian peoples to realize our own world-historical mission...We, the people of East Asia, must together assert our principle of East Asian culture and assume our stance world-historically. But in order to build a particular world [of East Asia], a central figure that carries the burden of the project is necessary. In East Asia today there is no other but Japan.⁴⁵

Here again, the double-edged colonized/colonizing language is at work; Japan is seen as one of the "oppressed," but it can be the leader of the pack in the fight for freedom. This rhetoric even had the advantage of convincing some of the other Asians that Japan could save them from the West, the "real" colonizing power.

Nishida's belief in the universal implications of Japanese philosophy did not stop at the borders of East Asia. His optimism went so far as to claim that "Long ago, the victory of Greece in the Persian War determined the direction of development of European culture up to this day, and in the same way the current East Asian war may determine a direction for world history to come."⁴⁶ As Feenberg notes, "from that standpoint Japan's defeat would seem to represent the destruction of a cultural universe, indeed of the very possibility of cultural plurality in the modern world."⁴⁷ As such, not just Asia but the whole world awaited a Japanese victory. The full extent of Nishida's ambition for Japan appears in the conclusion of "The Principle of the New World Order," where he writes, "It is fair to say that the principle of our national polity can provide the solution to today's

⁴⁵ NKZ 12, p. 429. Arisaka p. 102.

⁴⁶ NKZ 12, p. 429. Arisaka p. 102.

⁴⁷ Feenberg, *Alternative Modernity*, p. 189.

world-historical problems. Not only should the Anglo-American world submit to it, but the Axis powers too will follow it.”⁴⁸ The apparently harmless idea of Japan’s “leadership,” infused with the notion of universality, disguises a concrete historical project of world domination.

Japan thus exemplifies two uses of universality--liberatory and oppressive. Japan’s failure was to employ the discourse of liberation in order to justify oppression--a standard colonial procedure. Despite his intentions, Nishida’s discourse was not sufficiently critical, since it did not take into account the ambivalence inherent in the very notion of universality. As Hegel argues in his critique of the French Revolution, no matter how “universal” a theory, the only way in which it can be *implemented* is through the concrete actions of particular agents. Universality is necessarily particular in its *actual* manifestation; thus even the U.S., with its ideals of democracy, market society, and equality, for instance, discovered in Vietnam that it was not the bearer of a “universal” culture it took itself to be. The execution of “universality” (democracy) in Vietnam proved just as “particular” as any earlier colonial adventure. In the Japanese case, too, the universal elements Nishida identified in Japanese culture were transformed into their opposites in the *practice* of empire. He may have personally opposed imperialism, but his theory is still complicit; not only did he naively assume that its cosmopolitanism immunized it against the hazards of concrete political implementation, but his language formally mimicked the colonizing language of universalism.

In sum, postcolonial critique is helpful in seeing how Japanese philosophy’s claim of universality became entangled with the imperialist regime. This claim became a disguised form of colonizing ideology, but all this was mediated by Japan’s imaginary self-consciousness as the colonized. Coupled with its claim to modernity, the category of “East vs. West” was also utilized to mask the operations of colonial power. The question which remains for us today is this: How do we draw on the resources of modernity without unconsciously serving domination? The language of Asian unity and Japan’s possible leading role in it has resurfaced in the economic sphere in recent years. We must not forget what happened in our recent history, and if we are to tell ourselves a responsible story about the intra-Asian relations as well as the relation to other nations, our philosophical discourse must examine the theoretical pitfalls and hopefully avoid them.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ NKZ 12, p. 434. Arisaka p. 105.

⁴⁹ I wish to thank Andrew Feenberg for comments.