

# What is Japanese about Japanese Philosophy?

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Exactly seventy-three years after the angry crowds of Paris stormed the Bastille, on 14 July 1862, a ship set sail from the port of Shinagawa with a man on board who was to change the conceptual landscape of Japanese thought. In Nagasaki, he was transferred to the Dutch vessel *Kallipus* carrying a group of medicine students on their way to Europe. That ship, however, floundered in Batavia, and another one called *Ternate* took the group on board. Their entire journey lasted for eight months, during which the students got well acquainted with each other and started to contribute toward each other's intellectual development. It was then that our protagonist made the contribution for which he is primarily known these days.

His name was Nishi Amane, and his deed was coining a new word to designate "philosophy."

## A New Way of Thinking

Dissatisfied with his own intellectual tradition and an ardent admirer of the West, Nishi sought to bring to Japan a way of thinking that would be radically different from Confucianism, not to speak of Buddhism, which he considered to be vulgar and archaic. "The civilization and institutions of the United States and England, I believe, surpass Yao and Shun, who ruled by popular will," he had written to Matsuoka Rinjirō a few months prior to his departure (Havens 1970: 44), and more than that: these institutions were not the expression of the singular will of a monarch, however wise, but the systematic manifestation of underlying principles that had been discovered by the discipline of the mind. This discipline is what he considered a necessary condition for Japan to develop in the same direction. Not "the seeking of wisdom," called *kiken* (Japanese reading) by the great Song Neo-Confucianist Zhou Dunyi (1017–73) in his *Taiji Tushuo*, but "the seeking of clarity," *kitetsu*, is what the mind must practice in order to be able to establish a system of social, political and economic order that a civilised modern nation has to have. Just like many of his compatriots of the time, Nishi was initially thinking that the roots of this system might be found in the doctrines of Christianity, but quite soon he realised this is not the case: in a letter written in the next year to professor Johann Joseph Hoffmann, a German scholar working at Leiden University, he already acknowledges that the systems of Descartes, Locke, Hegel and Kant are something completely different from the teachings of Christianity and, although their thought is truly complicated, it is something that the Japanese civilization needs (Havens 1970: 50).

However, what Nishi meant by *tetsugaku*, the science of clarity, as he had started to call philosophy since 1874, was not quite what the term means or meant in its initial context. For Nishi, philosophy was a rather practical discipline. Much of his work has been dedicated to the separation of the micro- and macrocosm, or the demonstration that there is no one single principle that guides the universe, but that psychic and material processes have their separate ways. In this binary opposition, philosophy has to perform the task of making the world available to the mind, that is, of regulating the thought processes so that an objective understanding of reality, untainted by ideological prerequisites or religious prejudices, might become possible. It is thus an applicable science rather than an ethical teaching, and takes for its point of departure the reality of the world, not the lofty principles proclaimed by ancient authorities. This, for Nishi, has been the key factor to the success of the West, and therefore worthy of emulation also in Japan.

That, however, was easier thought than done. First of all, the Japanese language was completely unsuitable for voicing such ideas, which is why, in addition to the word for philosophy, Nishi has coined a large number of neologisms to be used as equivalents for Western philosophical concepts, and changed the meaning of many words in previous usage, mostly Confucian or Buddhist technical terms, assigning to them a semantic field of Western origin. These concepts include many without which, it seems, a language could not do in the modern world, such as “subjective” and “objective,” “rational,” “reality,” “phenomenon,” “deduction” or “psychology.” And yet, before Nishi, these words were missing in Japanese, and the concepts denoted by them obviously as well.

At this point it seems reasonable to ask whether the practice of philosophical thought as such is conceivable without these concepts. Because if it isn't, then that means that philosophy is essentially a Western pursuit, which was only transplanted to Japanese soil during the Meiji reforms and has nothing to do with the previous indigenous tradition of thought. On the other hand, if this isn't the case, then what is it precisely that Nishi introduced to Japan? If philosophical thought is a cultural universal that takes on specific local forms, then Japanese philosophy necessarily has a longer history behind it from which it should by no means be disassociated. And in both cases, there is also the additional question, posed in the title of this paper, but with a different meaning. If philosophy is a Western pursuit, can there be anything that makes Japanese philosophy Japanese in more than just the geographical sense? If philosophy is a cultural universal, what are the categories of Japanese culture that Japanese philosophical thinking reflects?

Let us now try to map the possible answers to these questions, and the arguments that usually go with them. There will also be a few conceptual choices that we have to make in the process. For example, it is not impossible to think of philosophy as an academic discipline, which follows the traditional Western division into subfields and branches, practiced by people with a more or less similar education, who are concerned with a predefined set of questions. If such were our understanding, it would be easy to show that philosophy is a Western cultural

phenomenon. The problem with this approach is that quite a number of prominent thinkers of that same Western tradition, such as Socrates, Spinoza or Nietzsche, do not fit the minimal conditions of what a philosopher in such a system has to be. Another and a much more serious objection derives from the contradiction between the two implicit premises of such a view. On the one hand, philosophy, thus understood, claims to formulate universal truths that are valid always and everywhere and completely independent of the form that expresses them. On the other hand, however, such philosophy not only has to follow the disciplinary and epistemic traditions established in and by the West, but also speaks exclusively through a conceptual apparatus that has been constructed on the basis of Western languages and closely follows their internal structure—that very apparatus that Nishi’s neologisms were meant to construe for Japanese usage. Even if it is claimed that the philosophically significant content of a sentence—a proposition—is fully translatable into another language (Grayling 1997: 14ff.), this can only apply to the end result of a thought process, and not the conditions of its development. And even so it is not possible to translate anything not strictly reducible to formulae without residue and comment, not if we use concepts that have any history or cultural connections. Philosophy thus claims to be both universal and Western at the same time.

This assertion, even though rarely expressed in quite so explicit terms, is completely racist, and yet shared by a multitude of leading thinkers and philosophical authorities all over the Western world. In no other sphere of human achievement, be it science, technology or art, is such arrogance to be met any longer, even if the West did try to downplay other cultures during the peak of the colonialist era. African music, Indian mathematics, Chinese medicine and inventions, Japanese poetry, non-Western arts from traditional theatre or visual arts to film and modern popular culture have long since been acknowledged equal to European and North American cultural production and have strongly influenced the development of the particular fields worldwide. Only in the field of philosophy it is the Westerners who have it, but everybody else has just “wisdom” or, at best, “thought.” This kind of academic white suprematism has already triggered a negativistic response: some younger Chinese scholars, for example, do not feel the need to associate their own thought tradition with any larger whole (such as “philosophy”), given the cold welcome and harsh conditions imposed on them (OuYang 2012). This leads to an opposition that is useful for no one, except those who want to be professors of philosophy without understanding much beyond their narrow specialisation.

## **Philosophy as a Cultural Universal**

Another possible approach would be to treat philosophy as a cultural universal, while not necessarily the producer of universally valid, form-independent truths—because any philosophical self-expression is inevitably bound to a linguistic form of some kind. The “philosophicality,” for the lack of a better term, would in that case not be tied to the formal

aspects of the argument, but to the nature of the problems and the specific attitude of approaching reality. Any inquiry into the nature of existence, any venture toward the structures of thought that are hidden beyond the surface of language, any effort to ground morality in principles rather than custom or authority, any such thought movement that follows explicit and rational rules of argumentation would then count as philosophical, no matter what kind of vocabulary it uses, no matter what rules of reasoning it adheres to. It should go without saying that a discussion of specifically cultural forms of philosophy should also be balanced by a link to an intercultural, intertraditional perspective that seeks to bring different approaches together on a common conceptual ground, and not one designed by one particular tradition only. Philosophical thought is a cultural practice, it reacts to the changes in the environment in which it is produced and developed (having contributed to many of these changes itself) and therefore such fusions are completely natural. Moreover, philosophical thought, unlike what is believed of natural science, is not evolving on a constant trail toward a greater understanding and a more accurate formulation of universal truths that might finally achieve completion, no matter what Hegel and Hegelians might have asserted. At the same time, philosophy, just as art, is cumulative: it does not throw away the former stages of its development as false and outdated. Aristotle and Descartes are still very much a part of the philosophical conversation even though their understanding of physics and biology is of merely historical interest.

According to this definition, quite a lot of Japanese traditional thought counts as philosophy. Thinkers usually considered “religious,” such as Dōgen, Shinran or Bankei, or political moralists, such as Ogyū Sorai or Muro Kyūsō, should be read also for the philosophical component of their work, not less so than St. Thomas Aquinas or Leibniz, for example, in whose systems a transcendental absolute, whom they worshipped according to the rules of their religion, occupied an even more central place than in the worldviews of their Japanese colleagues. It can be said that most Japanese philosophers did not expound their views in ordered and systematic ways like Spinoza or Kant, but there are also so many Westerners who did not, from Plato to Nietzsche and Kierkegaard up to recent thinkers such as Deleuze. Besides, let it be noted that systematicity, in itself, is not a strict prerequisite of philosophical thinking, and there have been many thinkers in many traditions who have quite explicitly claimed that a craving for systematic wholeness in fact closes thought to the ends it wants to achieve.

What Nishi Amane introduced to Japan is thus not philosophy as such, but a specific Western tradition of thinking philosophically, a specific way to model the world and to pose problems, which was novel to the Japanese and helped them to create the necessary conditions for cultural imports that they needed and desired. But this was by no means mixing oil with water. At the same time when Nishi and others revolutionised the conceptual domain, artists such as Takahashi Yūichi and Asai Chū worked to establish the *yōga* school of Japanese art, exploiting the canons and techniques of Western painting and, not less noteworthy, also adopting the Western model of the artist’s gaze in their choice of subject matter and framing the reality to be depicted. Nonetheless we do not say that Takahashi and Asai introduced proper

“art” to Japan (unlike philosophy, this art did not really fit in the Japanese cultural environment and is by now practically extinct), just as we do not claim that the form of prose called *shōsetsu* meant the introduction of “literary prose.”

It is from this perspective, I suggest, that we should look for the “Japaneseness” of Japanese philosophy, no matter what the tradition and vocabulary it uses. Traditions, at first sight incompatible, had been fused before, for example, when Greek thought was blended with Christian religion, or utopian socialism with rational economic theory and a teleological narrative of history. Although it has often been pointed out about Japan, it is actually true of any culture: there is no genuine, pure and untainted continuity in any living tradition. All cultures are based on fusions of heterogeneous elements, and this is how it should be, if a cultural tradition is to retain its vitality. The “Japanese” in the compound “Japanese philosophy” thus does not refer to some hypothetical pure beginning or unchanged cultural quality that is continuous throughout history, but to a specific way of blending cultural flows, in which the later stages contain the memory of the previous ones without necessarily abiding by them.

### **Philosophical Thought and Its Linguistic Form**

One rather central question about philosophy as cultural practice is its relation to natural language, since it is always expressed in a verbal form. The traditional idea that philosophical ideas are language-independent realities of thought is problematic in that it presupposes, almost as medieval realists did, that universal thought models are somehow real and not conditioned by the specific circumstances in which physical, biological and social reality meets a particular tool for describing them. A recently fashionable theory, developing Chomskian linguistics, has indeed claimed that all languages are basically just surface structures of an underlying repository of linguistic forms called *Mentalese*, hard-wired to the human brain (Pinker 1995). On a closer inquiry, this view falls apart, however, as Stephen Levinson, among others, has empirically demonstrated (Levinson and Wilkins 2006; Levinson 1996, 1998, 2003). The central question for philosophy, in this context, is whether logic, broadly understood as the general laws that govern thought processes and argumentation, is itself universal or language-dependent. For example, Carl Becker has claimed that particular linguistic systems, such as Japanese, engender also their own systems of logic (Becker 1991). On the other hand, there are also researchers such as Gregor Paul, who do not believe in the exclusivity of Western philosophy, but nonetheless maintain that there exists a universal logic, which can be and has been used in philosophical reasoning everywhere, East Asia included (Paul 1993: 14–17).

If Becker is right, does that mean that a sentence may be logical in one language, but cease to be so when translated into another? If Paul is right, does that mean that philosophy, even if culturally specific, is nonetheless language-independent? These questions are further complicated by the fact that Western logic has also come a long way since Aristotle. The word

now refers not only to formal, symbolic or modal logic, but also to the system of thought called logic in Hegel's work. What is the logic that Becker claims to be linguistically conditioned and Paul believes to be universal?

Without pretending to be able to answer this question here in full and to everyone's satisfaction, I would like to point out that "logic," no matter how it is understood, does not describe anything that is out there in the world, but only points to processes taking place in our minds as we speak about reality. For example, negation, a simple operation without which no logic can do, is something we can only think: there is no equivalent of logical negation in reality. Not referring to anything actually there is its very point. Denial, lack, absence and nothingness are always and necessarily linguistic, and it is not unimportant that different languages have a large variety of ways for expressing them. In fact, languages that only have one way of negating are exceptional. It is fairly typical, for instance, to negate processes and things with a different word—to use different "nots" for expressing "I am not a student" and "I am not sitting." In Finno-Ugric languages, negation is originally a verb, conjugated according to tempora and person. And so on. Even some Indo-European languages have a wider array of negations, thus in Greek the negation of indicative and imperative moods needs different words. Considering this multiplicity of negations helps us to understand, for example, why in the logic of Gongsun Long it is necessary to discuss if a white horse is indeed a horse (Hansen 2007). But regardless of whether we think that the rationalisation of some Indo-European languages to the point where there is one single word to perform all procedures of negation is taking us closer to an underlying thought universal, or that this process simply disregards a lot of important nuances, what we have to conclude is that logic is not a reflection of how things are independently of the human mind. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the variety of tools with which different cultures make sense of their living environments also entails a variety in the principles that they adhere to in organising their thoughts. By giving up the claim to universality that logics patterned on the structures of Indo-European languages normally put forward we do not, however, relativise either reality or the human mind. We simply acknowledge that no culture is privy to universal truths for which all are striving in their own way—no language is perfect and precise, no system of thought is final, the reality out there is what it is and we will continue to try to make sense of it, without ever achieving a complete and irrevocable understanding, even though each of us individually might arrive at an interim satisfactory result. This should be the attitude that distinguishes philosophy from religious belief. The same basic questioning approach should thus also be turned back to the discipline itself, as well as the methods that it makes use of in practice.

The relations between Japanese (or other East Asian) culture, language and thought illustrate this very clearly. Most modern Western thought normally shares three prerequisites that are conspicuously absent in all East Asian thinking: the Aristotelian way to view things paradigmatically as physical objects that can be exhaustively described by their properties, the Cartesian view of the core of the thinking self as a position outside the world of which it thinks,

and the Newtonian idea of space as an empty abstraction in which things are situated. Even though these ideas did not appear simultaneously and led, for some time, a separate existence also after their emergence, in a certain form they have now been become so widely accepted that it seems contrary to common sense to think of the world without them. (This, of course, does not entail the endorsement of Aristotelian system in full, or the dualism of Descartes in speaking about matter and mind, or the limits of Newtonian physics.) However, such a worldview, based on what I'd like to call the "ontological fallacy"—namely, the tendency to allocate to tangible objects a higher degree of existence than to phenomena in flux—does not agree very well with the structure of the Japanese language. For example, the entirely sensible Japanese way of expressing properties, based not on conceptualising a rigid attribution of a property with an object but on specifying the moment when the property occurs, or the ambivalence of most nouns that can also perform as verbs, as well as the verbal forms that can behave as nouns, not to speak of the absence of personal pronouns that would be neutral in relation to the social statuses of the speaker and her interlocutor, all belong to a language not aiming at the neutral description of an object-based externally observed conceptual space.

However, the alternative that makes sense in Japanese is philosophically just as methodical and has similar explanatory power. I have elsewhere analysed at length the Japanese notions of *mono* and *koto*, both meaning "thing," and their philosophical treatment by such truly different thinkers as Watsuji Tetsurō, a cultural particularist, Ide Takashi, a Western-style Aristotelian, Hiromatsu Wataru, a radical Marxist, and Kimura Bin, whose aim is to bridge psychiatry and the phenomenological tradition (Raud 2002). A lot has also been written about selfhood, mostly in Japanese socio-cultural practice (Bachnik and Quinn 1994; Doi 1973, 1986; Hamaguchi 1999; Kondo 1990; Rosenberger 1992) which is directly linked to the "no-self" of the Buddhist philosophical tradition (Kopf 2001). And finally, there is the conceptualisation of space, which has engendered a particular and amazingly productive aesthetic that has influenced many spheres of spatial practice from architecture, horticulture and interior design to urban planning (Berque 1976, 1982, 1986; Kurokawa 1994)—and, not surprisingly, also evolved to one of the central topics of Japanese philosophy, from Nishida's "logic of place" (1979) to the work of Nakamura Yūjirō (1983) and beyond.

### **An Example: The Phenomenon of Change**

Let us now look at an example of the differences between these registers of thought and compare the ways how the phenomenon of change is understood by Aristotle and Dōgen. In Aristotle, we find the classic analysis of change in *Physics*, I 7. Quite obviously, change is what occurs in time (as time, for Aristotle, is itself defined by change). He starts with dividing the things that can change into simple and complex. Take, for instance, a thin man who puts on weight and becomes fat. We have the simple phenomena of "thinness," "man" and "fatness"



here, and during the process of change one of these simple phenomena (“thinness”) is lost and replaced by another (“fatness”), while the simple phenomenon of “man” persists all the way through. But this is actually because in the beginning we had a complex phenomenon, “a thin man” combining “thinness” and “man.” One part of this complex phenomenon survives the change, the other does not, and therefore the initial complex phenomenon is also replaced by the result of the change. From this, Aristotle concludes, “from the various cases of becoming described here we can conclude that there must always be an underlying something, namely the thing that becomes, and though this thing is one in number, it is not one whole structurally” (190a13). This “underlying something” is what, in principle, cannot change itself. David Bostock calls our attention to the ambiguity of “underlying” in Aristotle’s usage: in logic, the underlying is simply the subject of which something is predicated, but in Physics, it is more the substance, the material of which the phenomenon is made (such as bronze underlying a statue) (Bostock 2006: 31). This leaves us no doubt about what the changing thing is: it is the material, physical, self-identical tangible object.

For all Buddhist thought, change is one of the most paramount categories altogether. Impermanence, the constant movement of the whole universe, the fundamental ephemerality of even the most stable and solid things is stressed constantly, change is not something that happens to normally stable and unchanging things, but, on the contrary, it is the primary condition of any existence. But when we look at things more closely, we find, as Dōgen has put it in an often-quoted passage, that:

Firewood becomes ashes and it cannot become firewood again. Although this is so, we should not see ashes as “after” and firewood as “before.” You should know that firewood abides in the dharma-configuration of firewood, for which there is a “before” and “after.” But although there is a difference between “before” and “after,” it is within the limits of this dharma-configuration. Ashes abide in the dharma-configuration of ashes, and there is a “before,” and there is an “after.” Just like this firewood, which will not become firewood again after it has become ashes, a human being will not return to life again after death. ... This is like winter and spring. One does not say that “winter” has become “spring,” one does not say that “spring” has become “summer.” *Genjōkōan* (Dōgen 1970: 36)

The notion translated here as “dharma-configuration” is a difficult one. Usually it is seen (with slight variations) to refer to particular “points” on the axis of “time” (seen here as the time-span of a thing’s existence) that simultaneously separate themselves from and contain the present and future (of the thing in question) within them and is, accordingly, translated as “dharma-stage” or “dharma-position.” We could compare this to a dimensionless viewpoint in a one-dimensional universe: if a point on a line could see, it would simultaneously gaze at the infinity of both sides of the line on which it is situated. A different view is held by Hee-jin Kim, who claims that this notion involves non-dualistic perception of reality, “in and through



the mediation of emptiness,” not that it would be the natural condition of each separate bit of reality at each singular moment (Kim 2004: 155). Tanahashi Kazuaki, whose interpretation is closest to mine, defines it as the “unique, nonrepeatable stage of a thing’s existence at any given moment” (Dōgen 1985: 318), translating it as the “phenomenal expression” of things.

Although all these authors stress that Dōgen teaches the unessentiality of all things, they nevertheless imply a starting point which is much more essentialist than the one Dōgen actually seems to hold. Even Linda Goodhew and David Loy, who interpret this passage as an assertion that “objects themselves are unreal, but their relativity also implies the unreality of objective time ... If there is only time then there is no time, because there can be no container (time) without a contained (objects)” (Goodhew and Loy 2002: 105), understand “things” as self-identical “objects” that are presumably out there in the world, whether real or unreal. However, if we look at “firewood” and “ashes” as designations of solely linguistic entities, names of things the existence of which we posit with our language, but which are without their own self-nature (similarly to what is designated by the words “spring” and “autumn,” in the case of which it is easier to see that there are no objective thing-referents to which they could refer), we can understand “abiding in a dharma-configuration” not as the relation between a thing and its (dharma-)position on whatever axis, but as the relation in which the constituent particles of reality are to each other: in one specific mode of organization they are perceived as “firewood,” in another as “ashes,” the notion of “firewood” abides in a particular configuration of dharmas just as the notion of “offside” abides in a particular configuration of players on a football field. On a photograph that depicts an offside situation, the images of the players stand absolutely still (as they also would in a dimensionless moment), but each of them has a certain speed and direction (past, present and future) that may, in a next moment, place them in some other configuration that can be described by some other technical term. Following the premises of Buddhist ontology, all these configurations are necessarily unique, unrepeatable and momentary, but this does not impede us from referring to more than one of them by the same linguistic and generic term.

## Conceptualising the Difference

We can thus see that these conceptual frameworks used for the description of what both thinkers physically witnessed in a more or less similar way are entirely different, yet both capable of delivering a workable and, in its own context, convincing philosophical interpretation of the phenomenon at hand. This is what is constantly stressed by Thomas P. Kasulis in his book *Intimacy or Integrity* (Kasulis 2002), possibly the most detailed and best-argued analysis of the differences of cultural prerequisites for philosophical thinking. Kasulis, deservedly well known for his expertise in both Japanese philosophy and religion (Kasulis 1989, 2004) does not differentiate so much between Japan and the West as between cultural choices that

make thinkers opt for a certain frame of mind rather than the other. Thus both “integrity” and “intimacy,” as he has called the two poles of thought, can be and in fact have been met in both regions, even though either of them is inclined to prefer one over the other. On the one end, we have tendency to prefer objectivity and individuality, on the other, the leaning toward holism and solidarity. Integrity prefers quantifiable and measurable knowledge and downplays undescribable expertise—however, for example, if we look at the judgments of figure-skating, we notice that judges tend to give fairly similar points to contestants, even if they cannot always explain why. Neither, Kasulis stresses, is also superior to the other, more logical or deeper, and both can function equally well as the basis of sophisticated systems of thought, although even in the ruling position they need a certain dose of the other in order to perform properly. A similar point has been made by Angus Graham (1986) who stresses the ability of Chinese “correlative” thinking models to function on par with strict Greek logic in order to achieve a philosophical view of the world.

Anthropologists have also described the various norms of social practice that are congruent with the linguistic peculiarities and cultural preferences in thought models. Joy Hendry, for example, presents a holistic description of different layers of Japanese culture through the metaphor of “wrapping” (Hendry 1993)—always escaping direct view and situating every act in a system of multi-tiered levels, minutely tuned degrees of formality without which no personal encounter or linguistic exchange is actually possible. And this also raises a question that will have to remain unanswered in the confines of this paper: is it the habitual ways of doing things, distilled from the centuries of tradition, that have influenced the mindframe of the people engaged in them to think of the world as they do, or is it, on the contrary, the registers of thought, sustained by the structures of languages, that have engendered the social and cultural practices that agree with them so well? In any case, both of them not only maintain the functionality of the other, but also make it seem the natural, true way for things to be.

Instead of concluding I would like to return for a moment to the man from whose travels we started, Nishi Amane, a pro-Western Japanese thinker if there ever was any. Among the many neologisms he coined for expressing the concepts hitherto absent, let me recall, we also find the words, used until today, for “subjective” and “objective.” Literally translated back from the Japanese these mean “the gaze of the host” and “the gaze of the guest.” Thus even the effort to transplant into Japanese one of those distinctions essential for conveying Western-type thought models, he still could not escape the Japanese underlying need for an interpersonal situation, a spatial arrangement and a clearly defined viewpoint that makes seeing the world possible. Thus, even for the import of Western concepts his thinking basis remained quintessentially Japanese. And that, we might guess, was the key to his success.

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