

# 'If the self is cultivated, ...' - some remarks on philosophy and politics in wartime Japan

'And if I were not afraid you would think me drunk, I would have sworn as well as spoken about the effect that [this man's words] have always had and still have on me.... This Marsyas ... has often brought me to such a pass, that I feel life isn't worth living, as long as I stay as I am. And you can't say that isn't true, Socrates.... For he makes me confess that I have a lot of flaws, but nevertheless I neglect to attend to myself, busying myself with the concerns of the Athenians. So I plug my ears and fly away from him...'.<sup>1</sup>

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This was how Alcibiades spoke to Socrates and other guests gathered in Agathon's house for that dinner party known to us as the 'Symposium'. One laughs at the performance of the drunken politician, but Alcibiades is in truth more a tragic figure. As a boy, he had told Socrates that he intended to govern the *polis* one day. Socrates wanted to know what that meant. Alcibiades had to concede that he did not know – and that, until then, he had not even been embarrassed about not knowing – to which Socrates put to him that before he set about minding the business of others, he should first 'attend to himself'.<sup>2</sup> During the 'Symposium', Alcibiades admitted that he had failed in the face of philosophy. And in the end, after a life governed by selfishness and lust for power, the Athenian politician and general died in disgrace at the hands of a murderer.

Socrates' end was tragic as well. It was the fulfilling of what Socrates saw as the philosopher's primary task - to approach young people all over the city and tell them that in order to live a life in light of godly truth, they should first 'take care of themselves' and 'know themselves' - for which his prosecutors attacked him.

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'Every epoch organizes the censorship of philosophy in its own way. Socrates had to give his life. Descartes was persecuted by the Sorbonne' – thus Hadrien France-Lanord's disparaging reaction to Emmanuel Faye's recent entry to the debate on the entanglement of the influential German philosopher Martin Heidegger with national socialism.<sup>3</sup> The unceasing debate on Heidegger's politics frequently appears even on the feature pages, and needs no comment here. Less known is that in Japan too, ever since the end of the Asia-Pacific War, a similar debate about philosophy's contamination by politics has smouldered. This debate was sparked by a series of publications in which the 'father of Japanese philosophy', Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), and thinkers affiliated with him – the so-called Kyōto School - got involved in the political business of 'Holy War' waged for a 'Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere'.

The debate on Nishida and the Kyōto School has been overshadowed by the debate on Heidegger. One reason for this 'Heidegger-factor' in the debate on the Kyōto School rests with merely strategic considerations of some of the debate's participants. But philosophical parallels can indeed be drawn between Nishida and Heidegger, and there are also direct links passing through some

of Nishida's disciples, who studied in Germany. One of these parallels might be a common concern with – or a certain resentment against – what we may call the 'ordinary self', which, as it is, is incapable of knowing the truth, and has to be 'overcome', so to speak. It was this concern, or resentment, which nourished Heidegger's understanding of the national socialist movement as a 'national revolution' against the 'hopeless frenzy of technology'. And it was out of the same concern that philosophers of the Kyōto School embraced the war as the most effective means to what was propagated in war-time Japan as the 'overcoming of modernity'. Moreover, for them – as for Socrates – the problem of the 'self' was closely linked with the problem of knowing how to govern others, and might therefore help to illuminate the relationship between philosophy and politics in war-time Japan.

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Japan's officially declared war objective was the establishment of a 'New Order in East Asia' and the defeat of the old world order as represented by the League of Nations. The philosophers of the Kyōto School assessed these objectives positively. The League of Nations, they argued, had been established to ensure world peace based upon the 'abstract idea' of a unity of autonomous peoples, upon capitalism and liberalism. In the Anglophone world however, freedom, was just another word for 'free competition', meaning 'repression of the weak', and it was this inner contradiction that had finally resulted in the destruction and defeat of that world order.<sup>4</sup> The West no longer represented *the* world; it had fallen into crisis, and in awareness of this, had pulled together defensively to form a particular world, thus facilitating the growing self-confidence of the East. The latter was no longer simply an object of world history. It had woken up to 'subjectivity' and came forth as a self-aware 'world-historical subject'. Like those of Europe, the peoples of Asia were joining together into a 'Family of Peoples', with Japan as its avantgarde. The fulfilment of this 'world-historical mission' of Japan, however, hinged on a profound self-overcoming of what Japan itself had been so far.

For, they noted, the modernisation and industrialisation of Japan under the motto of 'Civilisation and Enlightenment' had brought the ailments of modern industrial societies to Japan as well. Opposing the power of capitalist world civilisation was synonymous with opposing individualism, democracy, and liberalism, i.e. the system of values of modern civilisation. A deep rift separated the 'atomized' individual from state and society, the 'private' from the 'pub-

lic'. The modern state lacked a centre of gravity, a centripetal force counteracting the centrifugal forces exercised by selfish, private interests. 'The entrepreneur', maintained a member of the Kyōto School, 'thinks about the economy, the lawyer about law, and so on, but thinking about things in such isolated realms has now reached its limits'. A 'real renewal', he continued, had to put an end to the 'rampant spreading of such narrow subjectivity' and it was the 'breaking down of these borders' that was the task of philosophy. The 'total war', therefore, was 'precisely a 'philosophical war'. Because by compelling the concentration of forces, the conversion of the modern state into a 'nation-

*'total war' was 'the total destruction of the modern state, society, economy, culture and philosophy', i.e. the ultimate 'overcoming of modernity' itself*

al defence state', and teaching the individual 'asceticism' and the subordination of his or her private interests to the public weal, the war excelled in answering this very demand for the breakdown of borders, the merging together of the disintegrating areas of the military, art, economy, politics, and thinking etc., and the transformation of the modern '*homo oeconomicus*' (*keizaijin*) back into an 'original human' (*honrai no ningen*). In a nutshell: the 'total war' was more than just a struggle for a new society and a new world order in political terms. It was, at the same time, 'the total destruction of the modern state, society, economy, culture and philosophy', i.e. the ultimate 'overcoming of modernity' itself.

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Leaving further consideration of these ideas to the reader, I shall limit my remarks here to the significance of the word 'asceticism'. Referring to a specific religious exercise or practice of self-overcoming – i.e. the overcoming of vices and desires – the word imparts an explicitly religious connotation to the definition of the war as the 'overcoming of modernity' per se. This religious dimension also manifests itself in the wording of the following statement of one of Nishida Kitarō's disciples, Kōsaka Masaaki:

*'By the way, how should we view the attitude that regards the salvation of the small human being as something separated from the salvation of humankind as a whole? Nishida too recently said that world history is the purgatory of the soul of humankind, and that war too probably has this meaning.... In this way the soul of humankind becomes purified. Therefore all turning points of world history have been*

*decided by war. For this reason world history is the purgatory of humankind'.<sup>5</sup>*

The understanding of history as a purge and purification of the sins of the past, the idea of war as an ascetic exercise, or the Kyōto school philosopher Tanabe Hajime's conviction, that unceasing 'penitence' is the true principle of history – all this elevates the political philosophising of the Kyōto School into the realm of the religious, and, moreover, directly links it with the demand for a transformation or overcoming of the 'ordinary self'. The question of religion, Nishida Kitarō writes, 'is neither limited to the problem of objective knowledge, nor to the question of morals, which concern the Ought

of our willing ego. The questions are rather: What are we? Where are we? What is the essence of ourselves?... What makes the self-being the true self?...'.<sup>6</sup> Only against this background can the call of Nishida's disciples for a re-transformation of the modern '*homo oeconomicus*' back into an 'original human being' reveal its significance and pathos.

Nishida's metaphysics also explain why for his disciple Kōsaka the salvation of the 'small human being' is linked with the salvation of humankind as a whole. Within the limited frame of my remarks, however, I shall restrict myself to a simple illustration of the link between what we may call the 'cultivation of the self' and the 'salvation of humankind' by quoting some lines from the Chinese classic *The Great Learning* (*Daxue*). These lines may also shed light on a certain understanding of the relation between philosophy and politics, which one may recognize in Nishida and his disciples too:

*If the things are understood, then understanding is complete.*

*If understanding is complete, then the thoughts are true.*

*If the thoughts are true, then the mind is in order.*

*If the mind is in order, then the self is cultivated.*

*If the self is cultivated, then the house in order.*

*If the house is put in order, then the state is governed properly.*

*If the state is governed properly, then there is peace in the world.<sup>7</sup>*

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Christopher S. Goto-Jones has recently highlighted the significance of indigenous Japanese, non-Western traditions

of political thought to a proper understanding of Nishida's political philosophy, stressing in particular the critical potentials of a Buddhist 'politics of awakening'.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the call for an overcoming of the ordinary, selfish self as a pre-condition for good government implies a criticism of the state of mind of ordinary men such as the imperialist political and military leaders of war-time Japan. Some have identified a similar kind of criticism in the call of Nishida's disciples for an 'overcoming of modernity'. Still, ambiguity remains. For before the establishment of peace in the world, the salvation of humankind, or the emergence of a Buddhist state envisioned by Nishida at the end of his life, there was the purgatory of world history, the affirmation of the war as an ascetic exercise. And so in the Kyōto School's concern with the overcoming of the 'ordinary self' we may also find an answer to the question asked by the Heidegger expert Otto Pöggeler, 'how could the Kyōto School get so close to the war parties'?<sup>9</sup> The historical significance of this question, however, must not be overestimated: neither Alcibiades, nor the Japanese 'war parties' ever really listened to the philosophers' advice: 'You have to attend to yourself first!' ◀

## Notes

1. Platon, *Symposion*, 215 d - 216 a, modified by author.
2. Platon, *Alcibiades 1*, especially 128 d
3. Lanord in an interview in *Le Monde*, quoted from Jürg Altwegg, 'Wirkt sein Gift noch immer? Frankreich debattiert über Heidegger als Hitlers Philosoph', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Samstag*, 21. 5. 2005, Nr. 116, p. 31.
4. The following quotes are from a series of three round-table-discussions ('Sekai-shiteki tachiba to Nihon', Tōa kyōeiken no rinrisei to rekishisei', and 'Sōryokusen no tetsugagu'), held by four philosophers of the Kyōto School (Nishitani Keiji, Kōyama Iwao, Kōsaka Masaaki, Suzuki Shigetaka). These symposia were published in the popular journal *Chōō Kōron* in January 1942, April 1942 and January 1943.
5. *Chōō Kōron*, January 1942, p.192
6. Nishida Kitarō, 'Bashoteki ronri to shōkyōteki sekaikan', in *Nishida Kitarō zenshō*, 19 vols., Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1978-80, vol XI, p. 412.
7. Quoted from Peter Pörtner, *Jens Heise, Die Philosophie Japans – Von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*, Stuttgart: Kröner, 1995, p. 335-338 (English mine).
8. Christopher S. Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperty*, London and New York: Routledge, 2005. This book inspired my remarks.
9. Otto Pöggeler, *Neue Wege mit Martin Heidegger*, Freiburg i. B./ München, 1992, p. 88.

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