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Review of: Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School

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JAPAN

Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School. Edited by BRET W. DAVIS, BRIAN SCHROEDER, and JASON M. WIRTH. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. xii, 331 pp. \$70.00 (cloth); \$27.00 (paper).
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The aim of this anthology of seventeen essays, clearly set forth by the editors' introduction, is "to promote dialogue between Western and Eastern philosophy, and more specifically between Continental philosophy and the Kyoto School" (p. 1). This venture is guided by the conviction that philosophy is ultimately "a quest for liberating wisdom" and not just an academic exercise (p. 15). This book comes as a timely response to today's globalized environment, which is fast becoming one-dimensional, flat, and uniform, and in which human beings are unwittingly reduced to mere "numbers" for the profit of faceless corporations. Facing and acknowledging the present reality, thinkers are looking "deep within," to "dig down deeper," in order for "philosophy to recollect and retrieve its original radicality, for human beings, who think while living and live while thinking, the very act of living originally entails the act of philosophizing" (pp. 30–31)—so appeals Ueda Shizuteru (see below). In this milieu, intellectuals are challenged to "rethink the fundamental principles of the world" from the "vantage point of the gap between radically different cultural and philosophical traditions" (p. 22). Out of such an expanded vista, new philosophical possibilities are bound to emerge and show us how to engage twenty-first-century issues of all sorts that concern not only human beings but also the health of the earth. This volume invites us to share in a richer wisdom of humanity and overcome narrowly defined ethnocentrism and even the conventional academic concept of what philosophy is. As such, it reflects a certain paradigm shift that is taking place within the discipline of philosophy, announcing that the time is upon us to widen our intellectual horizons yet again.

Marking the importance of the publication of this book, Ueda Shizuteru, the widely known "third-generation" Kyoto School thinker (the "first generation" being Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime, the "second generation" being Nishitani Keiji, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, *et al.*), penned the original essay specifically for this volume entitled "Contributions to Dialogue with the Koto School" (pp. 19–32), which gives a handy exposition of the core philosophical insight of the Kyoto School thinkers, especially the notion of "absolute nothingness" developed by Nishida, and the idea of "emptiness" (*śūnyatā* or *kū*) applied to overcoming nihilism by going through the very midst of it, developed by Nishitani.

The variety of essays compiled in this "collection of flowers" (*antho-logia*) makes this book highly accessible to the novice and the seasoned researcher alike in the areas of Japanese thought and Western Continental philosophy. Those who are new to the field of intercultural philosophical dialogue can gain

an idea as to what sort of directions such dialogue may take, and what kind of new light it can shed on the insight and ideas that have hitherto been viewed solely under “one light.” For instance, from a Mahayana Buddhist perspective, Nietzsche’s thought opens up its hidden recesses, going beyond Nietzsche’s own understanding. Under the sympathetic and yet penetrating eyes of Nishitani Keiji, Nietzsche’s project reemerges as profoundly close to the Mahayana Buddhist inquiry into reality—as covered by Bret Davis’s “Nishitani after Nietzsche: From the Death of God to the Great Death of the Will” (pp. 82–101) and by David Jones in his “Empty Soul, Empty World: Nietzsche and Nishitani” (pp. 102–19). A careful study of Nietzsche and Nishitani allows a new perspective, out of which Davis’s unequivocal observation emerges: namely, that Nietzsche, “like many Western interpreters of Buddhism in the nineteenth century, misunderstood *nirvāna* in terms of a doctrine of annihilationism” (p. 91).

A few essays deal with the thoughts of specific thinkers. Steffen Döll’s “Ueda Shizuteru’s Phenomenology of Self and World: Critical Dialogue with Descartes, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty” (pp. 120–37) focuses on Ueda’s style of thinking, which he concludes takes Zen as the standpoint against which other standpoints are measured and evaluated. The creative tension between Nishida and Tanabe are treated by Sugimoto Kōichi in his “Tanabe Hajime’s Logic of Species and the Philosophy of Nishida Kitarō: A Critical Dialogue within the Kyoto School” (pp. 52–67). The inclusion of Miki Kiyoshi, an important “second generation” Kyoto School thinker, by way of the essay by Fujita Masakatsu, “*Logos* and *Pathos*: Miki Kiyoshi’s Logic of the Imagination” (pp. 305–18), adds another desirable layer to this collection.

One can get a lively taste of what it means to philosophize within the tradition of the Kyoto School, as Ōhashi Ryōsuke demonstrates in his “Philosophy as Auto-Bio-Graphy: The Example of the Kyoto School” (pp. 71–81). He muses on how “philosophy as the *biōs* of the *autō*, the life of the self, demands *graphē*,” a critical description.

Other essays give us an inkling of how one may enhance the understanding of one’s own tradition by submitting one’s inquiry to the intercultural context. We find this in Thomas J. J. Altizer’s personal account, “Buddha and God: Nishida’s Contributions to a New Apocalyptic Theology” (pp. 179–89). Erin McCarthy’s reflection on “Beyond the Binary: Watsuji Tetsurō and Luce Irigaray on Body, Self, and Ethics” (pp. 212–28) utilizes Watsuji’s definition of human existence essentially as “interpersonal relationships” to give further foundation to the embodied and relational discourse in feminist theory.

Still, there are other approaches within the intercultural philosophical dialogue, as represented by John C. Maraldo’s “Nothing Gives: Marion and Nishida on Gift-giving and God” (pp. 141–59), which sets Jean-Luc Marion, the Christian thinker, and Nishida Kitarō, the Buddhist thinker, on the stage of “phenomenology of selfless giving.” Gereon Kopf, in his “Language Games, Selflessness, and the Death of God: A/Theology in Contemporary Zen Buddhism and Deconstruction” (pp. 160–78), weaves into his methodology the contemporary deconstructionist ideas and the nonsubstantial thinking of the Kyoto School to see how the “subversive philosophy” works. In these inquiries, the Kyoto School thinkers

play the full dialogical role, and are even placed under critical analysis. Brian Schroeder's "Other-Power and Absolute Passivity in Tanabe and Levinas" (pp. 193–211) takes Tanabe's philosophy of metanoia and Levinas's thesis of "religion as ethics" and shows that there is ample room for various relationships to be formed among the notions of ethics, religion, metanoia, and philosophy.

Roughly eighty years ago, the German philosopher Karl Löwith criticized the Japanese philosophical scene of the late 1930s by employing the metaphor of a two-story house, the downstairs of which was done in a pure Japanese style and the upstairs in a European style (cf. pp. 36–37). What he implied by this metaphor was that the Japanese intellectual world was a sort of "schizophrenic world," and that their study of Western philosophy was somewhat "added on," or there was a disjunction between their lived world and their philosophical pursuits. Bret Davis's first essay, "Dialogue and Appropriation: The Kyoto School as Cross-Cultural Philosophy" (pp. 33–51), takes up related issues. What Löwith failed to see was the presence of the *stairs* that were connecting the two floors. The fact is that Japanese philosophers were making full and critical use of the dialogical stairs. Moreover, such a multicultural dwelling environment is today even more viable than ever, and some Westerners have found such a living environment appealing and congenial to their intellectual taste. Essays by Rolf Elberfeld, "The Middle Voice of Emptiness: Nishida and Nishitani" (pp. 269–85), and Jason M. Wirth, "Truly Nothing: The Kyoto School and Art" (pp. 286–304), are permeated with this type of sensitivity toward intercultural appreciation and assimilation, which has the power to transform the thinkers engaged in dialogue, and dialogue in turn enriches their "living space" (*Lebenswelt*). We are reminded that intercultural philosophical dialogue has this existential dimension.

In the 1990s, politicization of the Kyoto School thinkers generated a large corpus of writings. Bernard Stevens's "Overcoming Modernity: A Critical Response to the Kyoto School" (pp. 229–46) and Graham Parkes's "Heidegger and Japanese Fascism: An Unsubstantiated Connection" (pp. 247–65) show that the controversies are far from settled, and how inveterate obstinacy of adhering to "preconceptions" often traces its origin back to the lack of careful textual studies.

This book bears testimony to the fact that intercultural philosophy has come of age. Bret Davis describes this, while distantly reminding us of Löwith's metaphor of the "house": "Upon opening this door to dialogue with the East, what we find is that the Kyoto School of Japanese philosophy has, for several generations now, been passing through it from the other side" (p. 83).

For a long time, I have wondered why in the American culinary world, people have enthusiastically embraced ethnic food for the last two decades or even longer, whereas in the area of intercultural philosophical ventures we encounter much resistance. While going through this anthology and getting to know the background of each contributor (pp. 319–23), at least one explanation for this phenomenon emerges. When we go out, let's say, to a Persian restaurant to enjoy the food, we need not know the Persian language, or their way of thinking, or their long tradition of poets. We just need to bring our open mind to it. However, when it comes to intercultural philosophy, some workable knowledge of the Persian language and culture are prerequisites for entering into *meaningful*

dialogue. The wall of language stands in front of us. But precisely because this “wall” is something perfectly surmountable (with effort), it makes the intercultural philosophical venture that much more exciting and long lasting. It can even become one’s lifelong engagement and a way of life.

In 1917 (ninety-five years ago!), Nishida Kitarō thought about “what it means to be ‘Japanese’” in the globalizing milieu, and noted that each culture must fully develop its uniqueness to become a meaningful constituent of the larger “global culture.” If each culture, instead of diluting itself, unfolds itself in a more “universally specific” way, the more global significance it will have, opined Nishida.¹ This *prima facie* contradictory statement captures an insight into intercultural philosophical dialogue. This book, carefully edited and produced, is a welcome addition to the field of intercultural philosophy, and is recommended for all students of philosophy, language, religious studies, intellectual history, communication theory, comparative literature, and global studies.

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Truth from a Lie: Documentary, Detection, and Reflexivity in Abe Kōbō's Realist Project. By MARGARET S. KEY. New Studies of Modern Japan Series, Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011. ix, 197 pp. \$60.00 (cloth).
doi:10.1017/S0021911812001519

What does it mean to tell a truth from a lie? Margaret Key introduces Abe Kōbō as a literary maverick, a heterodox figure in the postwar Japanese literary landscape. Against those who label Abe as an “anti-realist,” Key argues that his realist agenda, bound up with experimentation in reportage and documentary forms, was a crucial component of his life’s work. She explains how Abe advanced a new genre of realism through integrating documentary and detective narrative form in reacting against *ari no mama* (“as is”) realism, which prevailed in the mainstream documentary literature of the 1950s and 1960s. To this end, Abe adopted avant-garde literary and documentary techniques as tools for challenging the audience to confront and expunge various forms of myth, such as *kyōdōtai* (collective body) and *furusato* (nostalgia for hometown). Aligned with leftist intellectuals of his time, Abe saw such ideals as a social veneer that prevents citizens from grappling with issues of corruption and hypocrisy in postwar industrialized Japan. Key claims that existing research on Abe’s work has mainly focused on his prose fiction and theatrical plays, but with little attention being paid to mass-media genres of radio and television drama and film.

¹Nishida Kitarō, “*Nihon-teki to iu koto ni tsuite*” [On what it means to be “Japanese”], in *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2005), 11:110–14.