

Notes Towards a Meontological Critique of the Ontological Metatradition of Philosophy

Neminemus

Author Note

[neminemus@outlook.com](mailto:neminemus@outlook.com)

## Abstract

There has been no challenge to ‘the tradition of philosophy’ in contemporaneity: philosophy has since evolved past the criticisms of the twentieth century. Indeed, contemporary philosophy is such a diverse pursuit that it is impossible to identify ‘the tradition of philosophy’. There is, however, an ontological philosophic metatradition. This ontological philosophy is inchoate, lacking a meontological pole. This pole can be provided by the spirituality of the east in the form of the philosophy of the Kyoto School, but first, philosophy must recognise this Zen meontology as ‘philosophy’ (哲学) rather than some *other* ‘thought’ (思想史).

*Keywords:* Meontology; Ontotheology; Tradition; Metatradition; Kyoto School.

## A Meontological Critique of the Ontological Metatradition of Philosophy

*All science needs to take some entity or other as its object of study. The point of contact is always in being, not in nothing. The discipline that has to do with nothingness is philosophy.*

–Tanabe Hajime, 田辺元全集, Vol. VI, p. 156.

The philosophy of contemporaneity has never once been criticised in its entirety. The feminists radically rail against the sentiment that ‘nothing has been more alien to women, more repellent, more inimical than truth’.<sup>1</sup> The postcolonialists denounce the thought that no negro ‘was ever found who presented anything great in art or science’.<sup>2</sup> But is there a single contemporary philosopher who still contends thus? In fact there is not: the publishers today do not print concrete truth if it is thought to offend; it is certainly impossible to have printed any abstract opinion of the same flavour. It is clear to any man with eyes that the remit of the feminists and postcolonialists is rapidly diminishing, and gone are the days when one could condemn philosophy itself for its prejudice theretoward.

The problem facing these criticisms is, however, altogether more dire. Inherent within the feminist or postcolonialist criticisms is a necessary normativity, because their criticisms are not logical but moral, that philosophy is not just exclusivist but *should* be inclusivist. But to insist that *the* tradition of philosophy excludes women and the colonised, and to simultaneously claim that women and negroes are philosophers too, makes the criticiser no better than the criticised: either the object of criticism is not *the* tradition of philosophy, but one of its many diverse traditions, or

---

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, 1998: §232.

<sup>2</sup> Kant, 2011: 58-59. cf. Hume, 1963: 213.

these other philosophers do not belong to ‘the tradition of philosophy’, but are something *other*, which makes it unmeaning to call them philosophers. The feminists and postcolonialists remain active, however, and their criticisms retain this antiquated universalist denunciation of ‘the tradition of philosophy’, hence it is the latter contradiction which is true of them, which is exemplified by such terms as ‘women philosophers’ and ‘nonwestern philosophy’.

Unlike the Eurocentric, or Euromonopolistic,<sup>3</sup> philosophy of modernity, contemporary philosophy is a globalised affair.<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to both keep with the times and mount a salient criticism against ‘the tradition of philosophy’, and easy to lambast an obsolete western philosophic tradition performed by long dead members of the gentry. To criticise ‘the tradition of philosophy’ today, one must first identify what it is that everything that is called ‘philosophy’ in contemporaneity shares in common. To this effect, there is no such thing as ‘the tradition of philosophy’.

If by ‘tradition’ it is meant *school*: Plato’s Academy and Aristotle’s Lyceum, the Lwów-Warsaw School and the Marburg School – their multiplicity attests to the nonexistence of a single tradition. Or if ‘tradition’ means *region*: ‘the tradition of philosophy’ is either Eurocentric, referring to the western philosophic tradition which is ‘a series of footnotes to Plato’,<sup>5</sup> or Sinocentric and Indocentric, referring to the eastern tradition which relates in the same way to Confucius (孔子) and the Buddha (釋迦). Both of these regional centralisations are false because, although the term ‘philosophy’ is Greek (φιλοσοφία), and the eastern term is a mere translation (哲学),<sup>6</sup> there is such

---

<sup>3</sup> cf. Davis, 2019b, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> *Contra* *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Whitehead, 1979: 39.

<sup>6</sup> The neologism was established by Nishi Amane (西周) in 百一新論 (1874).

a thing as eastern philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps ‘tradition’ refers to a *chronology*: then there should be neither contemporary Confucianism nor Shintō (神道), for Bushidō (武士道) came from the former and Native Studies (国学) the latter. Or if ‘tradition’ means *method*: Continental and Analytic, Hegelian dialectic (*dialektik*) and the Socratic elenchus (ἐλεγχος) – there is no such thing as a single philosophic method. There is no sense to the word in which one can assert the existence of ‘the tradition of philosophy’.

There is, however, a philosophic metatradition. That is to say: everything that has ever been called ‘philosophy’, and everything which has the name today, is and always has been ontological. The only thing which every philosophic tradition shares in common is a fundament in being (οὐσία): metaphysics treats of beings being, epistemology treats of knowledge being, ethics treats of good being, existentialism treats of human being, politics treats of social being. Western First Philosophy asks of ‘being qua being’ and western philosophy answers in kinds and degrees of being: universal being, particular being, highest being and original being.<sup>8</sup> This Greek ontology influenced Christian theology, which established God as the fount of all being, and western philosophy thereafter adhered to a metatraditional ontotheology (*ontotheologie*).<sup>9</sup> Everything that has heretofore been recognised as ‘philosophy’, east and west, shares this ontological fundament. This is the philosophic metatradition, and it is this ontology which is in error.

Ontology reduces philosophy to a mere science (*wissenschaft*): it is science which must take some being (*das Seiende*) or another as the object of study.<sup>10</sup> True philosophy is

---

<sup>7</sup> *Contra* Flew, 1971: 36.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Kasulis, 2018: 582.

<sup>9</sup> cf. Davis, 2019a.

<sup>10</sup> cf. THZ VI: 156.

meontological: its object of study is not mere beings (*das Seiende*), but being itself (*das Sein*), the truest expression of which is nothing (*das Nichts*). What has been called ‘eastern nothingness’ (東洋的無) is not a negation (非) of being (有), but nothingness (無). When beings (*das Seiende*) are the object of thought, being (*das Sein*) appears as no-thing (非有) rather than being itself (*das Sein*): nothing (*das Nichts*) is the veil of being (*das Sein*). When beings (*das Seiende*) are considered in terms of their predicates, they are thought to be-as (相存), but the comprehension of any being-as does not entail the existence of any being-there (現存), because the form of a being’s being (存在者) is distinct from the being-there (現存).<sup>11</sup> The origin of a being-as (相存) is its historical cause, whereas the origin of a being-there (現存) is the root source (ἀρχή) of the being’s (*das Seiende*) being itself (*das Sein*),<sup>12</sup> which does not fall within history.<sup>13</sup> It is absolute nothingness (絶対無) which grants a clearing (*Lichtung*) in which beings (*das Seiende*) reveals themselves. Yet nature (φύσις) loves to hide,<sup>14</sup> so the clearing (*Lichtung*) of nothing (*das Nichts*) gives beings (*das Seiende*) being (*das Sein*) by withdrawing itself from perception.<sup>15</sup> Mere science (*wissenschaft*) is the study of historical causation; to philosophise is to seek the root source of being itself (存在). This source is the a priori of the being-there (現存在), which never appears in actuality unadorned, so its study must be in non-actuality, which is nothingness (無).

Therefor is the meontological critique. But it can be said of it that it is no better than the universalising of the feminists and the postcolonialists, that ‘the metatradition of philosophy’ is no

---

<sup>11</sup> cf. NKC I: 193.

<sup>12</sup> cf. NKC I: 194.

<sup>13</sup> cf. Keta, 2018: 221.

<sup>14</sup> DK: 22B123.

<sup>15</sup> cf. HGA IX: 103-122; LXV: 246-247; Davis 2019a.

more ontological than ‘the tradition of philosophy’ is universally exclusive. The meontological critique uses terms employed by Heidegger and Eckhart and there is no doubt as to the existence of their philosophies. Likewise, Hegel stated the very critique, that ‘the first task of philosophy is to conceive of *absolute* nothingness’.<sup>16</sup> How can it be said that the philosophic metatradition is ontological when there is nothingness at the heart of European philosophy?

The negative theology of the likes of Eckhart still nevertheless points towards an inexpressibly higher *being*,<sup>17</sup> and, even though Hegel may speak of ‘absolute nothingness’, ‘western nothingness’ is merely a relative, oppositional nothingness (対立的無),<sup>18</sup> rather than the ‘eastern nothingness’ which is the true fount of being, an absolute nothingness (絶対無), where only the latter is true nothingness (真の無).<sup>19</sup> Even in philosophic nihilism (虚無主義), the representation of nothingness (無) ‘still shows traces of its reification as a “thing” that is not’.<sup>20</sup> If negation stops at a one-sided negation of being (非有), rather than nothingness (無), emptiness is not itself emptied. Only the emptiness of emptiness (*śūnyatā-śūnyatā*) or the ultimate emptiness (*atyanta-śūnyatā*) are true nothingness (真の無), the former dialectical and kenotic, the latter topological.<sup>21</sup> Unemptied emptiness is an ontological destructive nihilism (虚無主義) of being (存在) rather than a meontological creative nihilism (ニヒリズム) of nothingness (無).

---

<sup>16</sup> Hegel, 1977 in Ōhashi, 1984: 203 trans. in Davis, 2019a.

<sup>17</sup> USS VIII: 146.

<sup>18</sup> cf. Nishida, 2018: 10-12.

<sup>19</sup> NKC X: 75, 108.

<sup>20</sup> Nishitani, 2018: 213.

<sup>21</sup> cf. Davis, 2019a.

But still the criticism remains, because the meontological critique is developed from the Kyoto School (京都学派),<sup>22</sup> and are they not ‘philosophers’? If this is indeed the ‘philosophy’ of the Kyoto School, then how can it be said that the metatradition of philosophy is ontological, when there are here meontological philosophies?

The philosophy (哲学) of the Kyoto School, however, is not meontological; it is only their thought (思想史) as such which breaks from the metatradition of ontology. The thought of the Kyoto School synthesised European philosophy with Japanese mysticism, and ‘the idea of absolute nothingness came to awareness in the spirituality of the east’.<sup>23</sup> This eastern spirituality is not considered ‘philosophy’ because, for the Japanese, philosophy is perceived as a western science without counterpart in Japanese intellectual history. Japanese thought (日本思想史) is considered mystical and aesthetic,<sup>24</sup> and therefore does not meet the analyticity required for designation as ‘philosophy’. To posit this spiritual meontology, therefore, ‘as a foundation for philosophical thought represents a new step virtually without counterpart in the history of western philosophy’.<sup>25</sup>

This Japanese denial of a Japanese philosophy (日本哲学) is not a consequence of philosophic Euromonopolism,<sup>26</sup> or because the Japanese ‘have been intellectually and culturally colonized’.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it is the Japanese themselves who assert that ‘there is no such thing’,<sup>28</sup> not the European ‘intellectual colonisers’, and their reason for such an assertion has nothing to do with

---

<sup>22</sup> Mainly from Nishitani Keiji (西谷啓治).

<sup>23</sup> NKC IX: 226; Nishitani, 1991: 161.

<sup>24</sup> Such a view was famously promulgated by D. T. Suzuki (鈴木大拙).

<sup>25</sup> NKC IX: 226; Nishitani, 1991: 161.

<sup>26</sup> *Contra* Davis, 2019b, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> *Contra* Kasulis, 2018: 579.

<sup>28</sup> Sakamoto, 1993: 3.



a glorified perception of philosophy, but rather because ‘everything is imported, imitated’,<sup>29</sup> first Buddhism and Confucianism from China, then ontological philosophy from Europe.<sup>30</sup> The Japanese do not think that their thought, often associated with domestic Shintō, is *inferior* to philosophy, but *different*.

The meontological critique is thereof the entire philosophic metatradition. Philosophy can respond in one of two manners. Firstly, ontological philosophy can refute the meontological critique. Such a refutation, however, has been just now been rebutted. The other option, and the true thrust of the critique, is change; to assimilate the critique and synthesise a new philosophy – a synthesis between meontological Zen (禪) and ontological philosophy (φιλοσοφία).<sup>31</sup> A dissolution of the dualisms which plague contemporary philosophy.<sup>32</sup> A metanoesis (懺悔道).<sup>33</sup> To move beyond the European nihilism of destruction (虚無主義) towards a new a nihilism of creation (ニヒリズム). ‘Philosophical traditions build on elements that are discovered, engineered, combined, and adapted to meet the needs of their particular systems’.<sup>34</sup> The meontological critique is not meant to level philosophy, but to upbuild it. But first, ‘the spirituality of the east’ must be admitted to the ranks of philosophy.

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> cf. Kasulis, 1998; 2018: 35; 2020: 84; Blocker & Starling, 2001; Blocker, 2005: 791 f., 798; SJT-I 64, 193; SJT-II 74, 79, 550; JPS 23, 458, 923, 1027, 1187.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Nishitani, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> cf. Blocker & Starling, 2001: 144.

<sup>33</sup> cf. Hajime, 1987.

<sup>34</sup> Kasulis, 2018: 582.

## Bibliography

**Abbreviations**

- DK *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., H. A. Diels, and W. Kranz (Eds.). Zürich: Weidmann, 1934–1937.
- HGA *Heidegger Gesamtausgabe*. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975–.
- JPS *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, J. W. Heisig, T. P. Kasulis, and J. C. Maraldo (Eds.). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011.
- NKC 西谷啓治著作集. Tokyo: Sōbunsha, 1986–1995. 26 vols.
- SJT-I *Sources of Japanese Tradition: From Earliest Times to 1600*, Vol. I, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Wm. T. de Bary, D. Keene, G. Tanabe, and P. Varley (Eds.). New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.
- SJT-II *Sources of Japanese Tradition: 1600 to 2000*, Vol. II, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Wm. T. de Bary, C. Gluck, and A. Tiedemann (Eds.). New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- THZ 田辺元全集. Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1963–1964. 15 vols.
- USS 上田閑照集. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2001–2003. 11 vols.

**Other References**

- Blocker, H. G.; Starling, C. L. (2001). *Japanese Philosophy*. New York: University of New York Press.
- Blocker, H. G. (2005). Japanese Philosophy. In Borchert, D. M. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Vol. IV, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 791-199). Detroit: Macmillan Reference.
- Davis, B. W. (2019a). The Kyoto School. In Zalta, E. N. (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Davis, B. W. (2019b). Beyond Philosophical Euromonopolism: Other Ways of—Not Otherwise than—Philosophy. *Philosophy East and West* 69 (2):592-619.
- Davis, B. W. (2020). Engaging with the Japanese Philosophical Tradition of Engaged Knowing. *Journal of World Philosophies* 5: 256-258.
- Flew, A. (1971). *An Introduction to Western Philosophy*. London: Thames and Hudson.

- Hajime, T. (1987). *Philosophy as Metanoetics* (Yoshinori, T.; Viglielmo, V.; Heisig, J. W., Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977). *Faith and Knowledge* (Cerf, W.; Harris, H. S., Trans.). Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Hume, D. (1963). *Essays Moral, Political and Literary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kant, I. (2011). *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings* (Frierson, P.; Guyer, P., Eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kasulis, T. P. (1998). Japanese Philosophy. In Craig, E. (Ed.), *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.
- Kasulis, T. P. (2018). *Engaging Japanese Philosophy: A Short History*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Keta, M. (2018). Philosophy of Overcoming Nihilism. In Masakatsu, F. (Ed.); Chapeskie, R. (Trans.), *The Philosophy of the Kyoto School* (pp. 217-229). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Kasulis, T. P. (2020). Prince Shōtoku's *Constitution* and the Synthetic Nature of Japanese Thought. In Davis, B. W. (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Japanese Philosophy* (pp. 83-96). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nietzsche, F. (1998). *Beyond Good and Evil* (Faber, M., Trans. & Ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nishida, K. (2018). Place (1). In Masakatsu, F. (Ed.); Chapeskie, R. (Trans.), *The Philosophy of the Kyoto School* (pp. 3-12). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Nishitani, K. (1991). *Nishida Kitarō* (Yamamoto, S.; Heisig, J. W., Trans.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Nishitani, K. (2018). Nihilism and Emptiness. In Masakatsu, F. (Ed.); Chapeskie, R. (Trans.), *The Philosophy of the Kyoto School* (pp. 199-216). Singapore: Springer Nature Singapore.
- Ōhashi, R. (1984). *Zeitlichkeitsanalyse der Hegelschen Logik. Zur Idee einer Phänomenologie des Ortes*. Munich: Karl Alber.
- Sakamoto, H. (1993). *The Japan Foundation Newsletter* 21.
- Whitehead, A. N. (1979). *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (Griffin, D. R.; Sherburne, D., Eds.). New York: Free Press.