

Dialogue and Appropriation: The Kyoto School as Cross-Cultural Philosophy

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This essay introduces the Kyoto School by way of reflecting on hermeneutical as well as ethical and political issues that are central to the cross-cultural philosophical endeavors of its members, especially Nishida Kitarō and Nishitani Keiji, the pivotal figures of the School's first two generations. The thematic focus will be on the tension between cultural appropriation and creative synthesis on the one hand, and dialogue and respect for irreducible cultural differences on the other.

To begin with, the question is raised of whether and to what extent the cultural appropriation found in modern Japan can be compared with that found in ancient Greece. Next, Karl Löwith's criticism of modern Japanese intellectuals for purportedly failing to "critically appropriate" Western thought, a failure he sharply contrasts with the Greco-European tradition of "making what is other one's own," is discussed. Two critical responses to Löwith are then developed: first, Löwith neglected to take account of the Kyoto School's significant attempts to navigate a passage through the pendulum swing within modern Japan between deferential Eurocentrism and reactionary Japanism. And second, from the Kyoto School can be gleaned both a critique of willful cultural appropriation and intimations of a philosophy of genuine cross-cultural dialogue, wherein cultural differences would neither be obliterated nor reified. The essay ends with some remarks on the tension between the pluralistic ideals and the political entanglements of the Kyoto School.

Cultural Appropriation: Greek and Japanese

Under political pressure and military threat but never outright colonization (and not until 1945, occupation) by Western powers, the Japanese have to a

significant degree been able to modernize/Westernize on their own terms. They have selectively adopted things Western and adapted—or “translated”—them into things Japanese. Yet the Japanese today often find themselves stereotyped as imitators of the West, in whose imitations something essential is, if not tragically, at least comically “lost in translation.” If we are tempted to laugh at their appropriations of things Western, we should be reminded that our pop-culture adaptations of Zen and the art of making California rolls and karate movies may appear just as strange from a Japanese perspective.

A more serious case of amnesia is found in the fact we often forget that our Western cultures themselves are hardly products of homogeneous inbreeding. Modern Western cultures are heirs not only to the ancient Greek cultural synthesis of Mediterranean, Near Eastern, and probably also South Asian cultures,¹ but also to the subsequent wedding of that synthesis with the Judeo-Christian tradition as well as with various regional indigenous European cultures—not to mention subsequent influences from African, Native and Latin American, Islamic, and Far Eastern cultures.

Indeed, all complex cultures could be thought of as multicultural in the sense that they are products of multiple cultural translations, through which new developments are always made by way of alteration and metamorphosis. To borrow an insight from Gadamer, “understanding is not merely reproductive but always a productive activity as well.” And therefore “we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.*”² Insofar as both Western and Eastern cultures developed in large part through efforts to understand and assimilate foreign cultural achievements, cultural origins are more or less always productively lost in translation.³ Cultural purity is thus an ideological construct. Acknowledging this fact, however, need not lead to a blanket and uncritical affirmation of “hybridity.”⁴ There are, I think, still significant—if often fine and politically sensitive—lines to be drawn between eclectic syncretism and creative synthesis, between imitative colonialism and critical appropriation, and between missionary conversion and mutually transformative dialogue. In any case, the vitality of a culture would seem to depend not on its ability to preserve a purported purity, but rather on its ability to take in and accommodate the foreign without losing, in some sense, its own integrity and autonomy. The *manner* of cultural infusion would thus be crucial.

In this regard it is interesting, and perhaps provocative, to put the following two quotations next to one another; the first is from Nietzsche on the ancient Greeks, while the second is from Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945) on the modern Japanese.

It has been pointed out assiduously, to be sure, how much the Greeks were able to find and learn abroad in the Orient, and it is doubtless true that they picked up much there. . . . Nothing would be sillier than to claim an autochthonous development for the Greeks. On the contrary, they invariably absorbed other living cultures. The very reason they go so far is that they knew how to pick up the spear and throw it onward from the point where others had left it.⁵

[Japanese culture] is what might be called a culture without form; put [metaphorically] in terms of art, it is a musical culture. It is for this reason that up until now it has taken in various foreign cultures. If it had a firmly fixed culture, then it would have had to either make the foreign culture over into its own or be destroyed by it. But Japan has the special character of repeatedly taking in foreign cultures as they are and transforming itself. The reason for its excellence lies in the fact that Japanese culture progressively synthesizes various cultures. (NKZ 14: 416–17)

Reading these two passages together invites us to compare the cultural synthesis of ancient Greece with that of modern Japan. Both cultures deliberately open themselves to foreign influence, and yet in the process of appropriation everything entering Greece became Greek as does everything entering Japan become Japanese.

The Need for Critical Appropriation: Karl Löwith's Critique of Modern Japan

Is there any reason, then, that modern inheritors of the Greek cultural synthesis (and subsequent Western cultural syntheses) should disparage the cultural synthesis that has been taking place for the last century and a half in Japan? Some would say that there is indeed.

Karl Löwith—a student and critic of Heidegger who spent five years (1936–1941) in Japan after fleeing Nazi Germany—would strongly disagree with a comparison of the ancient Greeks and the modern Japanese, at least a comparison that puts one on par with the other. At the end of a 1941 essay on European nihilism,⁶ which was translated into Japanese, Löwith wrote an “Afterword to the Japanese Reader.” Writing at a time of reactionary self-assertion of Japanese culture and a “renunciation of Europe,” Löwith offered his reflections as a “justification of European self-critique and a critique of Japanese self-love.” He writes:

When in the latter half of the previous century Japan came into contact with us and took over our advances with admirable effort and feverish rapidity, our

culture was already in decline, even though on the surface it was advancing and conquering the entire earth. But in contrast to the Russians of the nineteenth century, at that time the Japanese did not open themselves critically to us; instead they first of all took over, naively and without critique, everything in the face of which our best minds, from Baudelaire to Nietzsche, experienced dread because as Europeans they could see through themselves and Europe. Japan came to know us only after it was too late, after we ourselves lost faith in our civilization and the best we had to offer was a self-critique of which Japan took no notice.⁷

According to Löwith, because Japan never really questioned its fundamental “self-love,” and was thus never really self-critical, its wholesale acceptance, and then later rejection of Western culture, also remained uncritically superficial. Mired in their unexamined self-adoration, the Japanese had purportedly failed to learn the most important lesson of Europe, namely that of self-critique. Later Löwith might have also argued that, both before and after the reactionary self-affirmation of the war years, Japanese self-love too easily turns over into self-hate, and thus imperialistic national assertion converts over into colonial subservience. In either case, what is missing is a Japanese ability to “think for themselves,”⁸ to *critically* reflect on their own tradition and to *critically* appropriate the foreign. The ability for such self-criticism and critical appropriation, on the other hand, is for Löwith a key element of the Greek heritage of the West.

Before examining what Löwith understands as the Greco-European manner of “genuine appropriation” of the foreign, let us reflect further on his critique of the Japanese. Löwith could be accused of over-generalizing. Given the time period of his sojourn, one wonders whether he is passing judgment on all of post-Meiji Japan from the perspective of a certain reactionary Japonism that was most prevalent in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Certainly in the Meiji (1868–1912), Taishō (1912–1926), and Early Shōwa (1926–) periods we find a number of great Japanese intellectuals struggling mightily with the question of what to introduce from the West and how to appropriate it in relation to their own traditions. Even figures at relatively opposite ends of the spectrum, like Fukuzawa Yukichi and Kiyozawa Manshi, could hardly be simply accused of either colonial subservience or uncritical self-adoration.

Nevertheless, by way of hyperbole Löwith does manage to clearly articulate the dilemma of modern Japanese intellectuals. He writes that they “live as if on two levels [or stories, *Stockwerken*]: a lower, more fundamental one, on which they feel and think in a Japanese way; and a higher one, on which the

European sciences [*Wissenschaften*] from Plato to Heidegger are lined up.”⁹ In other words, Japanese intellectuals live in a “two-storey house without a ladder” mediating the two levels. Unwilling to question an attachment to their Japanese identity, they were also unable, argues Löwith, to *critically* appropriate Western thought by way of engaging it in dialogue with their own traditions.

Elaborating on Löwith’s critique, we need stress that besides the schizophrenia of leaping back and forth between these “levels” or the homelessness of “falling between two stools,”¹⁰ there were also more perilous pitfalls to be found in this two-storey dwelling of modern Japan—namely, there were those who attached themselves uncritically to one level and virulently rejected the other. This led to an intra-Japanese antagonism between opposing camps of Eurocentrism and Japanism.¹¹ Broadly speaking, we also find a historical (and sometimes individual) pendulum swing between these academic encampments, with a general swing West during the Meiji, Taishō, and postwar periods, and a counter-swing East, or rather to Japan, during the first two (ca. 1925–45) and partially again during the last two decades (ca. 1970–90) of the Shōwa period.¹²

One contemporary Japanese scholar reflects critically on the pitfalls of the early decades of Japan’s encounter with the West as follows: What the early modern Japanese thinkers often lacked was “a reflection on the very nature of an encounter with a different tradition, a reflection on what it means to encounter an Other. Because of this lack, they found themselves caught in a squeeze between an inferiority-complex with regard to Western civilization on the one hand, and a reactionary self-love on the other. They found themselves forced into the bottle-neck of an either/or choice between the camp of Western Learning and that of Japanism.”¹³ How to live and think in the tension between their native traditions and those imported from the West—without falling into either of these pitfalls—remains to this day a great task for Japanese intellectuals.

Steering through a Pendulum Swing between Eurocentrism and Japanism

Yet were there not Japanese intellectuals who did more or less successfully attempt to steer a “middle way” through the pendulum swing between differential Eurocentrism and reactionary Japanism? It is in this context that we can speak of the contributions of the Kyoto School to Japanese academia, and from there to the wider world of cross-cultural dialogue. As if in direct response to Löwith’s critique, James Heisig has written that the aim of the Kyoto School philosophers was twofold: “an introduction of *Japanese* philosophy

into world philosophy while at the same time using western philosophy for a second look at Japanese thought trapped in fascination with its own uniqueness.¹⁴ In other words, the Kyoto School consistently attempted (sometimes more and sometimes less successfully) to steer a course between Japonism and Eurocentrism, and to bring both “levels,” and indeed the multiple cultural “layers”¹⁵ embedded in modern Japan, into critical and innovative dialogue with one another.

Conspicuously missing from Löwith’s afterword is any mention of the Kyoto School, even though they were clearly the most important group of Japanese philosophers at the time he was writing.¹⁶ Löwith went to Japan as a visiting professor, in order to “disseminate through writing and teaching” what he thought valuable in European philosophy and culture, and not primarily as a student of Japanese culture or even as a partner in dialogue.¹⁷ Yet the Japanese were, for their part, willing to learn from him, and generations of Japanese thinkers have paid serious attention to his critique.¹⁸

In his own 1949 book on European nihilism, Nishitani Keiji wrote a concluding chapter, titled “The Meaning of Nihilism for Us,” in which he acknowledges and responds to Löwith’s critique. Nishitani writes:

Löwith compares the indiscriminating nature of the Japanese with the free mastery of the ancient Greeks when they adopted neighboring cultures: they felt free among others as if they were at home, and at the same time retained their sense of self. There is no such unity of self and others in the case of Japan. Löwith says that modern Japan is itself a “living contradiction.” What he says is true—but how are we then to resolve such a contradiction? (NKC 8: 179; SN 176)

Nishitani goes on to say that the answer to this question can only come by way of first clearly recognizing the cultural crisis and “spiritual void” in modern Japan: “The reason the void was generated in the spiritual foundation of the Japanese in the first place was that we rushed earnestly into Westernization and in the process forgot ourselves” (NKC 8: 181–82; SN 178). Moreover, along with Löwith (as well as Nietzsche, Heidegger, and the many other European intellectuals cited in Löwith’s study), Nishitani sees the West itself as having fallen into a crisis of nihilism. According to Nishitani, for the Japanese there are two lessons—and two tasks—to be learned from European nihilism:

[It] teaches us, first, to recognize clearly the crisis that stands in the way of Western civilization—and therefore in the way of our Westernization—and to take the analysis of the crisis by “the best minds in Europe,” and their efforts to overcome the modern period, and make them our own concern. This may entail pursuing the present course of Westernization to term. Secondly, European nihilism teach-

es us to return to our forgotten selves and to reflect on the tradition of oriental culture. (NKC 8: 183; SN 179)

While his *Nihilism* book undertook the first task, that of understanding and appropriating European efforts to overcome nihilism, most of Nishitani's subsequent thought—namely his philosophizing on and from “the standpoint of Zen”—took up the second task of reappropriating an Asian tradition.

Nishitani is careful to distinguish his project from that of Japan's Romantic School¹⁹ and other reactionary thinkers who sought to reject the infusion of Western culture and return to a purportedly pure culture of premodern Japan. Nishitani writes:

There is no turning back to the way things were. What is past is dead and gone, only to be repudiated or subject to radical critique. The tradition must be rediscovered from the ultimate point where it is grasped in advance as “the end” (or *eschaton*) of our Westernization and of Western civilization itself. Our tradition must be appropriated from the direction in which we are heading, as a new possibility. (NKC 8: 183; SN 179)

Nishitani was thus self-consciously undertaking a dual task: that of critically and creatively appropriating Western thought and culture while at the same time critically and creatively reappropriating Asian and Japanese traditions. Ultimately, moreover, his aim was not just to foster an autonomous yet international Japanese culture, but to make a Japanese contribution to thinking through the increasingly global problem of nihilism.

The problem of “nihilism” per se was a central theme of Nishitani's thought in particular,²⁰ a topic with which other Kyoto School thinkers, such as Nishida, were less directly engaged. However, the dual endeavor of critically and creatively appropriating Western culture and philosophy while also critically and creatively reappropriating Asian thought, was shared by all members of the Kyoto School, as well as by a number of important thinkers closely related to them.²¹ The philosophers associated with the Kyoto School were not only keenly aware of the issues pointed out in Löwith's critique; they had in fact set out to address them long before Löwith arrived in Japan to teach them the ways of Western appropriation.

Questioning Willful Appropriation: A Counter-Critique of Löwith, Hegel, and the Greeks

But it is not enough to merely point out how the Kyoto School managed to learn from or even preempt Löwith's lessons on critical cultural appropriation.

For even if they could—*should* the Japanese simply imitate the Greeks? *Should* the Japanese simply appropriate Western manners of appropriation? Löwith holds up the Greeks as a paradigm of authentic cross-cultural encounter. But is there not often something rather *willful* and, to put it bluntly, self-centered about Greco-European cultural appropriation?

In his 1949 text, “The Meaning of Nihilism for Us,” Nishitani follows Nietzsche in calling for a recovery of what he calls a “primordial will” to forge a path into the future by way of critically retrieving what is noble in the culture and philosophy of one’s ancestors. However, while the theme of “looking back in order to look ahead” remains a constant, a radical critique of the notion of “will” becomes a central theme in Nishitani’s thought by the 1961 appearance of his magnum opus, *What is Religion?* (translated as *Religion and Nothingness*).²²

There Nishitani claims that all “standpoints of will” are in the end bound to one type or another of “self-centeredness,” be it that of an individual or collective egoism, or that of an ethnocentrism that is backed up by the will of a personal god (NKC 10: 222–23; RN 202–203). What he calls the field of *śūnyatā* (emptiness) is reachable only by means of “an absolute negativity toward ‘the will’ that underlies every type of self-centeredness.” The Buddhist standpoint of non-ego (*muga*) on the field of *śūnyatā*, he writes, “implies an orientation directly opposite to that of will” (NKC 10: 276; RN 251; translation modified). And it is only from a standpoint of non-willing that a genuine “responsibility to every neighbor and every other”—which entails a non-dual (that is, “not one and not two”) relation which neither alienates nor incorporates the other—becomes possible (NKC 10: 281; RN 255).

The non-willing and non-dualistic standpoint of *śūnyatā* is ultimately realized by way of an intuitive wisdom (*prajñā*) that transcends the limits of subjective reason; and the holistic practice of self-emptying that leads to this wisdom is something Nishitani thinks the West can learn from the East.²³ On the other hand, however, a dialogical suspension of egoistic will in submission to reason is something that he thinks the East can learn from the West. Commenting favorably on the legacy of Platonic dialogue, Nishitani writes: “Dialogue begins . . . from a letting go of the ego and a submission to reasonableness.” Moreover, the philosophical spirit introduced by Plato’s dialogues is said to be that of “inquiry aimed at the gradual discovery of something new, something not yet known to the participants” (NKC 9: 56; NK 43).²⁴ Dialogue involves, therefore, a suspension of egoistic will that opens one up to what one can learn from, and together with, one’s interlocutor, as opposed to a willful

appropriation of the other in a battle for the preservation and expansion of the domain of one's own ego. In his multifaceted critique of the will itself, we see how Nishitani brings both Eastern and Western sources into fruitful dialogue.

Nishida—for whom philosophical inquiry involved not just intellectual self-reflection but also an *askēsis* of self-negation²⁵—characterized Japanese culture not only as “musical” (that is, affective, harmonious, and fluid), but also as harboring an ego-negating spirit of “going to the truth of things” by “bowing one's head before the truth.” Only by “emptying oneself” can one “see things by becoming them,” and this practice of self-emptying is said to be both the wellspring of artistic creativity and the Japanese correlate to, and thus point of reception for, the discipline of Western science and rational inquiry (NKZ 12: 343–46). Nishida thus sought to reappropriate sources in the Japanese tradition that would open it up to mutually enhancing dialogue, and not antagonistic competition, with the West.

Not only was Nishida critical of Western imperialism and exploitation, but he was also strongly opposed to Japan-centric ideologues who wanted to either reject Western culture altogether or more often—as expressed in the popular slogan *wakon-yōsai* (Japanese spirit, Western technique)—reduce its role to that of a technical handmaid to an uncritically reified sense of Japanese spirit. According to Nishida, Japan should neither retreat from the world into its own isolated cultural shell, nor should its goal be to unilaterally appropriate or “digest” (*shōka*, literally “erase and transform”) Western culture by incorporating it into a purportedly unchanging culture or spirit of its own (NKZ 14: 399–400). For Nishida, tradition is not a static heritage, but rather a dynamic process wherein “the new is guided by the old and, at the same time, the new changes the old” (NKZ 14: 384).²⁶ Moreover, what was most valuable in the life of Japanese tradition was a spirit of self-emptying opening to others and to truth, not an attachment to one's own cultural artifacts and dogma or a will to appropriate the foreign and make it conform to one's designs. Rather than conservative retreat from or willful appropriation of other cultures, Japan should genuinely open itself to dialogue with them, in order to both learn and contribute. Only in this way could the world become truly worldly, in the sense that cultures would, in dialogue, be free to creatively transform themselves while maintaining their fluid integrity as living traditions (NKZ 14: 402).²⁷

According to Nishitani, such cross-cultural dialogue would be made possible only by way of what he calls “a shift from today's ‘egoistic’ way of being

a nation to a ‘non-egoistic’ way of being a nation” (NKC 4: 69).²⁸ For Nishida, too, an internal principle of self-negation is a condition for becoming open to other cultures and thus a participant in world history (NKZ 8: 45). Rolf Elberfeld has well articulated this important aspect of Nishida’s thought when he writes: “If a particular historical world possesses no self-negation, then the will arises in it to become the entire world and it attempts to wipe out all other worlds.” According to Nishida, insofar as a culture is open to dialogue with other cultures, “then it possesses in itself [a principle of] self-negation, which means that it does not understand itself as the one and only comprehensive world.” Only by way of such self-negation is such a culture “free from itself in its intercourse with other worlds and cultures that are foreign to it.”²⁹

In light of this critique of willful cultural appropriation that we have gleaned from the Kyoto School, let us return to critically examine Löwith’s account of the “genuine appropriation” (*echte Aneignung*) he finds in the West, and in the West alone. Löwith writes:

The appropriation of something other and foreign would presuppose that one can *alienate* or distance oneself from oneself, and that one then, on the basis of the distance one has acquired from oneself, makes what is other one’s own as something foreign. . . . In this way, the Greeks took a world whose roots were foreign and made it into their home. “Of course they received the substantial beginnings of their religion, education, and social cohesion more or less from Asia, Syria, and Egypt; but they wiped out, transformed, processed, and changed what was foreign in this origin; they made something different out of it, to such an extent that what they, like us, value, acknowledge, and love in it is precisely what is essentially their own.”³⁰

Self-alienation—a partial analogue to the Kyoto School’s self-emptying or ego-negation—plays the role here of a means to the end of self-enhancing appropriation of what is foreign. If there is an unmistakably Hegelian ring to Löwith’s account of cultural appropriation, this is no accident; indeed the second half of the above passage is quoted from Hegel, and is followed by Löwith’s statement: “This means that [the Greeks] were, in the Hegelian sense, with themselves [*bei sich*] or free in the other.” The Japanese, by way of contrast, are said to “not have any impulse to transform what is foreign into something of their own. They do not come from others back to themselves; they are not free, or—to put it as Hegel does—they are not with themselves in being-other.”³¹

For Löwith, as for Nishida, a “failure to critique oneself rests on the inability to see oneself as another and to go out of oneself.”³² Yet whereas Nishida

had emphasized self-negation and becoming “free from oneself” as an opening to dialogue with others and to the indigestible alterity of the other in the depths of the non-substantial self, for Hegel and Löwith such “self-alienation” is ultimately a step on the way to “transforming the foreign into something of one’s own” so that one can come back to an expanded “freedom for oneself.”

Undoubtedly there is much to learn from Löwith and Hegel with regard to self-enhancing cultural appropriation. However, it is highly questionable that we should turn to Hegel—in many ways the philosophical godfather of Eurocentrism—in order to learn how to enter into a genuine *dialogue* with other cultures. According to Hegel, “world history,” as the historical process of Spirit’s self-othering and self-recollecting, “goes from East to West; for as Europe is the absolute end of world-history, Asia is its beginning.”³³ Since the Greeks had purportedly already “internalized” (*er-innert*) all that was of value in Eastern culture and “Oriental wisdom,” these are now only a memory (*Er-innerung*) for the West; and thus for Hegel there could be no reason to return to engage in a *dialogue* with the East.

In a number of ways Hegel is here taking up and radicalizing the ancient Greek stance toward foreign cultures.³⁴ The ancient Greeks tended to see their appropriations as improvements on the originals, and it is perhaps for this reason that they rarely cite their Near Eastern and Indian sources. Although the ancient Greeks are generally considered the origin of Western culture, they did not in fact simply pride themselves on originality. Wilhelm Halbass writes: “It is precisely the openness for the possibility of alien sources, the readiness to learn and the awareness of such readiness which sustains the Greek claim of being different from the Orient.”³⁵ There is a profound ambiguity here. On the one hand, the Greeks demonstrated a marked openness, or at least an inquisitiveness toward the foreign; on the other hand, they were motivated by a drive to appropriate the foreign, stripping it of its alterity and transforming its achievements into something of their own. And precisely this ability and will to appropriate the foreign is taken by the Greeks to be an essential trait that distinguishes them from the Orient.

This conceit of a supposedly unique ability to take an interest in and comprehend other cultures is clearly echoed two millennia later in Hegel’s presumption that “Asian thought is comprehensible and interpretable within European thought, but not vice versa.”³⁶ Hegel epitomizes the Western spirit of conquest and comprehension of alterity; and his grand narrative of the self-alienation and self-recovery of Spirit provides a most cunning justification for a Eurocentric teleological account of world history. Yet, as Gadamer recogniz-

es, “Hegel’s dialectic is a monologue.”³⁷ It is not a cross-cultural dialogue that is genuinely open to the alterity of other traditions, an alterity which exceeds the Western philosopher’s powers of self-recollection.

“The step from Hegel to Nishida [and the Kyoto School] is the step from a single ‘world history’ which derives from a principle of uniformity, to a history of ‘worldly worlds’ which is in itself structured polycentrically.”³⁸ It is a step from a Eurocentric monologue to a pluralistic *polylogue*, where each participant not only alienates itself from its self-attachment so as to better receive the gifts of others, but also empties itself of its imperialistic drive in order to let others be, not just elsewhere, but also in the very heart of the inter-relational self (NKZ 6: 381).³⁹

PLURALISTIC DREAMS AND POLITICAL NIGHTMARES

As Edward Said has demonstrated, a monological Orientalism has characterized much of what modern Western intellectuals have had to say about the East.⁴⁰ Moreover, a teleological Eurocentrism pervades not only much of modern Western philosophy, but also more overtly political theories of “development” and “sociocultural evolution.”⁴¹ Such theories often tend to shift the geographical center from Europe to the United States, today’s juggernaut of globalization. Francis Fukuyama even provides us with a grand-narrative legitimization of teleological Ameri-centrism.⁴² He argues that all societies, even those who are dragging their feet or violently resisting, are destined to progress along the “caravan trail” toward us (i.e., the U.S.). The United States is thought to be the beacon of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism, the ultimate political and economic form of a nation in which all individuals are free at last to compete against one another for fame and fortune, instead of fighting over ideas. Indeed Fukuyama sees the last bulwark against the nihilism of what Nietzsche calls the “last man,” in the *thumos* (ambition) of capitalistic competition. This is because, in the globalized American world-culture that Fukuyama envisions as his teleological “end of history,” there are no more grand ideological battles to fight. On the other hand, Samuel Huntington has (in)famously argued that the global ideological wars are just getting started, and will usher in an inevitable life-or-death struggle between eight or nine fundamentally incompatible civilizations.⁴³ Must we acquiesce to either global Americanization or a clash of civilizations?

The Kyoto School attempted to develop an alternative global vision. Its members were among the first non-Western philosophers to thoroughly criticize the trend toward Euro/Ameri-centric cultural homogenization, and to do

so without calling for a regressive parochialism and without resigning us to a clash of cultures.

Nishida both affirmed the synthetic character of cultures, Japan in particular,⁴⁴ and argued that this need not and should not imply an annihilation of cultural integrity and cultural differences. In a true “worldly world” or “world of worlds” (*sekai-teki sekai*),⁴⁵ each culture would be allowed to open itself up to other cultures *in its own way*. Nishida denies that the individuality of the world’s cultures should (or even could) be reduced to a global oneness: “The loss of specificity entails the disappearance of culture itself. . . . A true world culture will be formed [only] by various cultures which, while maintaining their own respective standpoints, develop themselves through the mediation of the world” (NKZ 7: 452–53). A culture would develop, not dissipate itself, by opening up to dialogical engagement with others. In this way Nishida attempts to resolve the tension between maintaining a fluid sense of cultural identity and bringing about a cooperative exchange between cultures.

It needs to be pointed out that Nishida did not always think of cultural interaction in terms of peaceful harmony (Jp. *wa*); he accepts that it also entails mutual strife and struggle (Gr. *polemos*).⁴⁶ In places, Nishida speaks of the worldly world of “contradictory identity” not only in terms of “mutual supplementation” (NKZ 12: 392), but also in terms of a “mutual struggle” (see NKZ 8: 529; 12: 334).⁴⁷ Nishida accepts that historical ages have in the past always been established by a nation taking charge and unifying a world, and that the global world as a whole was first unified by Western imperialism. And yet, he goes on to write, we stand on the brink of a radically new world-historical era in which we must go beyond the simple paradigm of mutual competition between “nations in opposition.” Above all, Nishida repeatedly emphasizes, “the imperialistic idea that puts one ethnic nation in the center surely belongs to the past.” The new global paradigm must be pluralistic rather than imperialistic, and this implies moving beyond competitive antagonism to mutually transforming dialogue, to the collaborative construction of a “world of worlds,” a unity-in-diversity to which each nation contributes on the basis of its own world-historical perspective (NKZ 10: 256, 337).

Hence, when Nishida claims that Japan has a special ability to assimilate foreign cultures, this does not mean that it fails to achieve or loses its own identity in the process. And it *should* also not mean that *only* Japan is capably of a synthesis of the world’s cultures. If this were his assertion, then he would be subject to the criticism that “Nishida attacked . . . Eurocentrism by promoting an equivalent Japanism.”⁴⁸ It is true that Nishida, along with the rest of

the Kyoto School, did think that Japan was in a special position to help usher in a new age of both post-isolationism and post-imperialism. They thought that, precisely because of Japan's ability to assimilate the strengths of others cultures—and in particular to modernize/Westernize—without abandoning its own tradition, it could lead other Asian nations in a resistance to Western imperialism and to the establishment of a “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere” (*daitōa kyōeiken*).

Unfortunately, the reality of Japan's political construction of the so-called Co-Prosperty Sphere had little to do with the ideality of the Kyoto School's visions, which were themselves not unproblematic. Whether, to what extent, and in what manner Nishida and the other Kyoto School philosophers did end up supporting and promoting Japan's disastrous imperialistic revolt against Western imperialism are questions that have fueled a controversy that has surrounded the Kyoto School for several generations. While clearly their political thought must be read critically, it is also clear by now that the Kyoto School can hardly be accused of simply proffering an ideological justification for Japanese militaristic imperialism.⁴⁹ Their political engagements are more aptly described in terms of what Ōhashi calls “oppositional cooperation” (*hantaisei-teki kyōryoku*).⁵⁰ In other words, they attempted to reform Japanese political thought from within by redefining its terms and introducing a rational and “world-historical” standpoint to what was quickly degenerating into an irrational Japan-centric fever.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to delve into this controversy. There has been a lot of work done, and there remains much still to be done on the political entanglements of the Kyoto School during the Pacific War.⁵¹ In any case, here I have attempted to take up the Kyoto School philosophers at their cross-cultural best, rather than to try to catch them at their political worst. I hope at least to have shown that they offer us an invaluable set of dialogue partners in the *de facto* post-isolationist and *de jure* post-imperialist meeting of Eastern and Western cultures.

Nishida and the other members of the Kyoto School were “philosophers of interculturality” in both senses of the genitive in this phrase: They thought *from out of* their experience of the meeting of Eastern and Western cultures in modern Japan; and they thought *about* what a cross-cultural encounter does and should entail.⁵² What I have suggested that we can glean from their experience and thought is this: Cross-cultural encounter should be motivated not only by a will to self-enhancing appropriation of the foreign, and not ultimately by a teleological drive toward synthetic (mono-

logical) unity, but rather first and foremost by a non-willful openness to dialogue without end.

NOTES

1. On the cultural and philosophical interactions between ancient Greece, Persia, Egypt, and India, see Thomas McEvilley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies in Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press, 2002).

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. edition, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 297. Gadamer, however, restricts his philosophical hermeneutics to the Western tradition. For a critique of Gadamer in this regard, see my “Taiho to kaikō: Seiyōtetsugaku kara shisakuteki-taiwa e” [Step back and encounter: from Western philosophy toward a dialogue of thought], *Nihontetsugakushi kenkyū* [Studies in Japanese philosophy] 1 (2003): 36–66.

3. On the insurmountable limits and productive possibilities of translation between linguistic and cultural “frameworks,” see Fujita Masakatsu, “Ibunkakan no taiwa (honyaku) no kanōsei o megutte” [On the possibility of dialogue (translation) between different cultures], in Fujita Masakatsu and Bret Davis, eds., *Sekai no naka no Nihon no tetsugaku* [Japanese philosophy in the world] (Kyoto: Shōwadō, 2005). Ohashi Ryōsuke interprets “Japanese modernity” as a “trans-lation” (Gn. *Über-setzung*) of European modernity, wherein the “Buddhist and Shinto mindset that underlies Japanese culture provides the peculiarly malleable basis on which the foreign European world and its products, science and technology, were taken over, cultivated and modified” (*Japan im interkulturellen Dialog* [Munich: Iudicium, 1999], 129, 201; my translation). Rolf Elberfeld writes that Nishida “finds . . . a new and different beginning in philosophy by means of the ‘trans-lation’ of Western philosophy into the Japanese cultural world” (*Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945): Moderne japanische Philosophie und die Frage nach der Interkulturalität* [Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999], 53; my translation). Also see in this regard John Maraldo, “Tradition, Textuality, and the Trans-lation of Philosophy: The Case of Japan,” in Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine, eds., *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

4. On the debated use of this term in postcolonial theory, see Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 173–83.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. Marianne Cowan (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1962), 29–30.

6. Karl Löwith, “Der europäische Nihilismus,” in Karl Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1983–1986), 2: 532–40; an English translation is available in Karl Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, ed. Richard Wolin, trans. Gary Steiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 228–34. Incidentally, the Japanese translation of Löwith’s text, *Yōroppa no nihirizumu* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō), appeared in 1948, but the original German was not published until its inclusion in volume 2 of Löwith’s *Sämtliche Schriften*.

7. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 533–34; *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 229.

8. See Fujita Masakatsu, “Kindai no chōkoku’ o megutte” [On the idea of “overcoming modernity”], in *Nihonjin no jikoninshiki* [The self-perception of the Japanese], ed. Aoki Mamoru et al. (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1999), 32–33.

9. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 537; Martin Heidegger and *European Nihilism*, 232. Elsewhere Löwith further develops his critique of “modern Japan,” which he says is “a contradiction in terms, which, however, exists”; see *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 543–47, 556–59, 588ff. He contrasts the superficiality of modern Japan’s assimilation of Western culture with ancient Japan’s assimilation of Chinese culture: “The Chinese culture is indeed integrated, the Western civilization is only adjusted and adopted” (*ibid.*, 545; see also 557, 593).

10. See Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 547, 558.

11. In his sweeping polemic against *nihonjinron* (theories of Japanese uniqueness), *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), Peter Dale misleadingly lumps Nishida and other thinkers related to the Kyoto School together with a range of reactionary Japanists. Bernard Faure, while warning against falling into “sociopolitical reductionism,” and while expressly not attempting to address “the strengths of the philosophical ideas” of Nishida and the Kyoto School, nevertheless characterizes the effects of the Kyoto School as “reverse Orientalism” (“The Kyoto School and Reverse Orientalism,” in *Japan in Traditional and Postmodern Perspectives*). During the war, however, the “world-historical philosophy” of the Kyoto School was censured by the ideologues of “Imperial Way Philosophy” for being too worldly and failing to be Japancentric (see Ōhashi Ryōsuke, *Kyōtōgakuha to Nihon-kaigun* [The Kyoto School and the Japanese navy] [Kyoto: PHP Shinsho, 2001], 71–72). John Maraldo reviews the debate regarding the Kyoto School’s relation to Japanism, and insightfully concludes that the apparent standoff between nationalism and internationalism may be a false one, as we “come to recognize world philosophers as people who speak to others out of a particular tradition, rather than those who would pretend a view from nowhere” (“Ōbei no shiten kara mita Kyoto-gakuha no yurai to yukue” [The whence and whither of the Kyoto School from a Western perspective], in *Sekai no naka no Nihon no tetsugaku*, 51).

12. Cf. Dale, *The Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*, 213.

13. Kioka Nobuo, “Kaikō no ronri: Kuki Shūzō” [The logic of encounter: Kuki Shūzō], in Tsunetoshi Sōzaburō, ed., *Nihon no tetsugaku o manabu hito no tame ni* [For those studying Japanese philosophy] (Kyoto: Sekaishisōsha, 1998), 142.

14. James W. Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 270.

15. Watsuji characterizes Japanese culture in terms of layers (*jūsō*) (see Watsuji Tetsurō, *Shinpen Nihonseiishinshi kenkyū* [New edition of studies in the spiritual history of Japan], ed. Fujita Masakatsu [Kyoto: Tōeisha, 2002], 239–46). According to Watsuji, it is precisely the contemporaneous coexistence of such cultural layers, rather than the exclusive replacement of one with the other, that characterizes Japanese culture.

16. In a later text from 1943, Löwith does refer to Nishida as the sole original thinker in Japan, “who is comparable to any of the living philosophers of the West in depth of thought and subtlety.” “But even this man’s work,” he goes on to say, “is no more than an adaptation of Western methodology, the use of it for a logical clarification of the fundamental Japanese intuitions about the world” (*Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 560). In 1960, after having apparently read a few more German translations, Löwith acknowledges that “Nishida is one of the few Japanese philosophers who, thanks to

their education in Zen Buddhism, have their own productive viewpoint on European thinking, and do not only reproduce it in a disengaged manner" (ibid., 582).

17. Löwith, *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 234. However, Löwith did come to think that "some years in the Far East are almost indispensable for a critical, i.e., discriminating understanding of ourselves" (*Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 541), and he apparently did at times appropriate Japanese culture, Zen in particular, into his thought (see the editor's introduction to *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 3). Moreover, upon emigrating to America from Japan, he wrote in English two critical reflections on Japanese culture, "Japan's Westernization and Moral Foundation" (1942–1943) and the revealingly titled "The Japanese Mind: A Picture of the Mentality that We Must Understand if We are to Conquer" (1943). Years later, Löwith also published a comparative essay, "Bemerkungen zum Unterschied von Orient und Okzident" [Remarks on the difference between Orient and Occident] (1960). In addition to the "Afterword to the Japanese Reader" in his book on European nihilism, my references to the second volume of Löwith's *Sämtliche Schriften* have been to these three essays.

18. For two noteworthy, more recent responses to Löwith's critique, see Ōhashi, *Nihon-tekina mono, Yōroppa-tekina mono* [Things Japanese and things European], 152ff.; and Ōkōchi Ryōgi, *Ibunka rikai no genten* [Principles of understanding foreign cultures] (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1995), 20ff.

19. In this regard see Nishitani's debate with Kobayashi Hideo, who argued for a rejection of modernity and a return to the premodern Japanese classics. See Kawakami Tetsutarō, Takeuchi Yoshimi et al., *Kindai no chōkoku* [The overcoming of modernity] (Sendai: Fuzanbō, 1979), 217ff.

20. See Bret W. Davis, "The Step Back Through Nihilism: The Radical Orientation of Nishitani Keiji's Philosophy of Zen," *Synthesis Philosophica* 37 (2004): 139–59.

21. See, for example, Kuki Shūzō's remarks in "Bergson in Japan," in Stephen Light, *Shūzō Kuki and Jean-Paul Sartre: Influence and Counter-Influence in the Early History of Existential Phenomenology* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 74.

22. It is perhaps partly under the influence of the later Heidegger's turn to a radical critique of the will (see my *Heidegger and the Will* [Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007]), but more directly on the basis of a Buddhist critique of egoistic craving, that Nishitani comes to see the concept of will as inherently problematic. See my essay in the present volume, "Nishitani after Nietzsche: From the Death of God to the Great Death of the Will."

23. For Nishitani's attempt to move through and beyond (Hegel's) reason to a Zen Buddhist standpoint of *prajñā*, see his "Hanya to risei" [*Prajñā* and Reason], in NKC 13.

24. I would argue, however, that this mutual openness to learning something new ("not yet known") is only half the legacy of Platonic dialogue. The other half is rooted in the doctrine of anamnesis and in Socratic irony, where the dialogical encounter is only an occasion for self-recollection and pedagogy. On this issue, see my "Taiho to kaikō."

25. See Bret W. Davis, "Provocative Ambivalences in Japanese Philosophy of Religion: With a Focus on Nishida and Zen," in James W. Heisig, ed., *Japanese Philosophy Abroad* (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2004), 262ff.

26. On Nishida's conception of tradition, see Agustin Jacinto-Zavala, "Tradition and the Problem of Knowledge in Nishida Philosophy," *Dokyo International Review* 14 (2001): 91–118.

27. Elsewhere Nishida suggests that Asia's potential contribution to the world was to "shed new light on Western culture," and to add Eastern culture to the great Western meeting of Greek and Jewish cultures (NKZ 14: 407; and 12: 159–60). For a good account of these and other themes in Nishida's theory of culture, see Fujita Masakatsu, "Nihon-bunka, tōyō-bunka, sekai-bunka: Nishida Kitarō no Nihon-bunka-ron" [Japanese culture, Asian culture, world culture: Nishida Kitarō's theory of culture], in Fujita Masakatsu et al., eds., *Higashiajia to tetsugaku* [East Asia and philosophy] (Kyoto: Nakanishiya Press, 2003).

28. It is this ideal of a "nation of non-ego" that Nishitani points back to in 1946 as his attempt to resist and change from within Japan's wartime politics (NKC 4: 381).

29. Elberfeld, *Kitarō Nishida*, 209, 215.

30. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 536; *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 231. The second half of Löwith's text is quoted from Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I, Suhrkamp Theorie Werkausgabe* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1982), 18: 174, and we are also referred to *ibid.*, 12: 237. The first part of this passage also contains a reference to *ibid.*, 4: 320ff.

31. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 537; *Martin Heidegger and European Nihilism*, 232.

32. Löwith, *Sämtliche Schriften*, 2: 572.

33. G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Werke 12* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 134. Ōhashi Ryōsuke writes that Hegel did not foresee that the winds of imperialism would turn the tide of world history back to the East; and, more importantly, that this would not ultimately be a matter of the triumphant spread of the Western completion of history, but rather that it would become clear that the European world has a qualitatively different "outside" and can thus no longer be considered to be the entire world; *Uchi naru ikoku, soto naru Nihon* [The foreign inside and Japan outside] (Kyoto: Jinbunshoin, 1999), 160–61.

34. As Löwith writes elsewhere, according to Hegel's world history, it is first with the Greeks (as opposed to the Orient, where the world-spirit has not yet become self-consciously liberated) that "we feel at home immediately, because we are upon the ground of spirit, which independently *claims for itself everything alien*" (Karl Löwith, *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, trans. David E. Green [New York: Columbia University Press, 1964], 33; my emphasis).

35. Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 5–6.

36. *Ibid.*, 96.

37. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 369.

38. Elberfeld, *Kitarō Nishida*, 213.

39. See note 27, above.

40. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978). While Said focuses his critique on Western literature, a similar critique could be made against philosophers; although here the silence of indifference tends to be more deafening than the blasts of distortion. However, it is also necessary to supplement Said's critique of Orientalism by pointing out that since the Enlightenment a number of Western thinkers have self-critically affirmed Asian philosophies, or at least used them as a "corrective mirror" through which to engage in criticism of the West (see J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* [New York: Routledge, 1997]).

41. For critical responses to such theories, see Fred Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), chap. 7; and *Alternative Visions* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), chaps. 9–10.

42. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: The Free Press, 1992).

43. Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

44. See, however, John C. Maraldo, “The Problem of World Culture: Towards an Appropriation of Nishida’s Philosophy of Culture,” *The Eastern Buddhist* 28, no. 2 (1995): 183–97. Maraldo argues that “Nishida took for granted that a single people formed the ethnic basis of a nation state and he foresaw a multicultural world of different ethnic nations. He did not [however] recognize or foresee multi-ethnic or multicultural nations” (194). Moreover, Maraldo writes, it is not just modern nations such as the United States that are multicultural, for even Japan’s purported homogeneity is in fact an ideological construct laid over “long centuries of absorption and suppression of minority ethnic groups” (193). Yet this important criticism could be understood as an “immanent critique” which turns Nishida’s insights back on his own blind spots.

45. On this notion, and for a more extensive critical treatment of the issues raised in this section, see Bret W. Davis, “Toward a World of Worlds: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and the Place of Cross-Cultural Dialogue,” in James W. Heisig, ed., *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy* (Nagoya: Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, 2006).

46. See Nishida’s affirmative references to Heraclitus’s saying that “*polemos* is the father of all things” in NKZ 8: 508, 516.

47. Also see Elberfeld, *Kitarō Nishida*, 223–27.

48. Maraldo, “The Problem of World Culture,” 192.

49. See the often criticized characterization (or polemical caricature) of the Kyoto School in Tetsuo Najita and H. D. Harootunian, “Japan’s Revolt against the West,” in Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi, ed., *Modern Japanese Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 238–39.

50. Ōhashi, *Kyōtōgakuha to Nihon-kaigun*, 20ff.

51. For an overview of this issue, see section 4 of my article on the “The Kyoto School” in the online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. For two excellent collections on this topic, see James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, eds., *Rude Awakenings: Zen, The Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1994), and Chris Goto-Jones, ed., *Re-politicising the Kyoto School as Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007). Also see my “Toward a World of Worlds,” and chapters 4, 13, and 14 in the present volume.

52. See Elberfeld, *Kitarō Nishida*, 61.