Kyoto Philosophy—Intrinsically Nationalistic?

Jan Van Bragt

Tanaka...joined the JCP in 1927 while a student in the aesthetics department of the Imperial University of Tokyo. In July 1930, he was arrested for leading the armed May Day struggle. While in jail, his mother, after voicing an apology to the Emperor and society over her son’s activities, committed hara-kiri. Having learned of her suicide, Tanaka renounced communism while still behind bars. In 1941, he was released through an amnesty. He then went through spiritual training at a Zen temple and acquired what he termed the concepts of “becoming one with the emperor” and “absolute nothingness without left, right, or center.” (Japan Times, December 12, 1993)

As one of those who has a certain stake in the fortunes of the Kyoto school, I am not unaware of the accusations raised against its philosophers of complicity in Japan’s nationalism and its military adventures during the first half of the Shôwa period. The difficulty is knowing just how to deal with such claims. On the one hand, academic honesty seems to require that those of us who have been in some measure instrumental in

introducing their thought to a wider audience outside Japan should face the question squarely. On the other hand, the long years of personal involve-
m ent seem to compromise our judgment from the start. I confess that rarely, if ever, have I undertaken a scholarly task that has cost me as much soul-
searching as this one has. I beg the reader to indulge my personal comments as I find my way into the principal subject matter of this essay.

THE SCOPE OF THE QUESTION

In my study of the Kyoto school I have tended to pass over the political dimension as “just one of those things” that one is vaguely aware of but that somehow distracts from the main point—in my case, the encounter of Buddhism and Christianity. Did the current brouhaha awaken me to a culpable blindness, like someone shaken by the feminist movement into realizing longstanding habits of male chauvinism? Have I been wrong all along not to recognize the connections between the “nationalistic stance” of the Kyoto philosophers and their religious thought?

The Broader Context

Only after I had been invited to write on these questions did it dawn on me how important the question is, first because nationalism in general is a crucial issue for humanity as a whole, and secondly because the “nationalism” of the Kyoto philosophers is not simply a question about the past but equally a question about the present. Recent world events—mainly in Eastern Europe and Russia, but also in Sri Lanka and elsewhere—have once more illustrated the explosive force and disastrous effects of nationalism, which Marx seemed to have considered a thing of the past. These events appear to reconfirm Arnold Toynbee’s thesis that nationalism, seen as a kind of “collective ego-
ism,” constitutes the greatest danger for humankind. “The sin of pride becomes mortally dangerous,” he writes, “when it is translated from the singular into the plural, from egoism into what, to coin a word, one might call ‘nosism’.”

Toynbee goes on to argue that curbing that collective egoism is the principal common task of all religions. If we agree with his diagnosis, and also with Nishitani Keiji’s conviction that only religion can “provide the force to eradicate the deepest roots of the ‘ego’,” the question then becomes: Is religion after all capable of doing the job on the collective level? Even with

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3 Nishitani Keiji, View of the world, view of the nation], NKC 4:201.
the aid of the supposedly cool and rational thinking of philosophy, is religion any match for the social passions of an age?

History seems to tell us that religion has indeed enabled certain rare individuals in time of national crisis to distance themselves from collective, tribal egoisms. But seldom, if ever, has it been able to prevent the social passions of a people from flaring up into open warfare. On the contrary, it has more often provided the rallying cry— *Gott mit uns*. As Toynbee has it, “we are always relapsing from the worship of God into the worship of our tribe or of ourselves.”4 On the whole it is only after the battles had been fought and passions had cooled that religion was able to begin exercising its powers of reconciliation. It is good to keep this in mind when asking whether and to what degree the Kyoto philosophers kept their distance from the nationalism of the Shōwa period of crisis as a result of their philosophy (and religion), and what their teachings might possibly have done to stem the tide of Japanese nationalism.5

The question also came to seem important to me because its scope extends beyond a mere “judgment” about the attitude of a group of wartime philosophers who have since died and should perhaps be allowed to rest in peace. The accusation raised against the Kyoto philosophers is not that they were the original instigators of a Japanese nationalism whose practical adventures brought untold suffering to other countries in Asia and was ultimately catastrophic for Japan itself. To the best of my knowledge, the point of the criticism is rather that their philosophy did not keep them from being swept up into the prevailing whirlwind of nationalism, that it did not enable them to “keep their heads” when people all about them were losing theirs but rather turned them into accomplices insofar as they provided rationalizations for that nationalism. It seems to me that the more basic problem is this larger Japanese nationalism,6 rather than any particular philosophical statement of it, and this at once lifts the critique of the Kyoto school out of the past and

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4 A. Toynbee, *Christianity among the Religions*, 94.

5 Writing about the life and character of Pope John Paul II, Peter Hebblethwaite has the following to say: “During World War I, his father heard propaganda lectures from Max Scheler, the phenomenologist. Scheler claimed the Central Powers were defending Christian civilization against the godless French, the autocratic Russians and the mercantile Protestant English.” See “Pope Soldiers on…,” *National Catholic Reporter* 30/1 (22 October 1993): 10.

6 The importance of the understanding of such a background has been emphasized also in connection with Heidegger’s Nazism. “What needs to be better comprehended is German intellectuals’ disenchantment [in the early nineteenth century] with Enlightenment principles…. I think that only by appreciating the lure of anti-Enlightenment thinking…can we begin to make sense of Heidegger’s conviction that Nazism had an ‘inner truth and greatness’ that could inspire and transform all Germans.” Alan Paskov, “Heidegger and Nazism,” *Philosophy East and West* 41 (1991): 526.
into present history. Time and again one sees signs that the people of Japan, or at the least its leaders, have not fundamentally broken with nationalism or repudiated its past effects. One need only think of the massive conspiracy of silence in school textbooks and elsewhere that enshrouds the foul deeds of the war, or of the vehement reactions provoked from influential figures when a mayor or prime minister dares to speak explicitly of Japan’s guilt. “The Japanese people consider it a virtue to forget the past, but this becomes a wrong when it serves the evasion of responsibility.”7

Ienaga Saburō, who has been waging a solitary war against this state of affairs for more than thirty years, stands as an important witness in this regard. Speaking in a recent interview of how the truth was kept from the people of Japan during the war, he observed:

Many things have now been disclosed to the people. The new democracy under a Japanese constitution...played a large role in improving the consciousness of the Japanese people. At bottom, however, continuity with the prewar era has been strong. There has been no true overturning of the roots of the thinking process that existed before the war. A large number of people still believe that the war was for the sake of the nation, or that Japan was driven into a corner and had no other choice. I don’t know whether they really believe this consciously, but they still believe in a “Japanese-style spirit,” as in prewar days.8

In this connection, something that Robert Bellah wrote nearly thirty years ago may still be worth pondering:

The humane and gracious figure of Watsuji Tetsurō would not be problematic for modern Japan were it not for the fact that partly behind the cloak of just such thinking as his, a profoundly pathological social movement brought Japan near to total disaster. The ideology of that movement [in its explicit version] ...was so deeply repudiated in the post-war period that it can probably never reappear. But it is of the essence of Japanese particularism that it exists as a tacit assumption more than as an explicit ideology.9

If this more general Japanese nationalistic or particularistic trend is indeed the basic problem, then the question of the nationalism of the Kyoto school must always be located in this broader context. In other words, the

question may be rephrased to read: *To what extent did Japanese nationalism penetrate the philosophy of the Kyoto school?*

**A Renewal of Reflection**

In this way I came to see the need for a renewed reflection on “Japanese nationalism.” Are the Japanese people particularly nationalistic, and if so, in what sense? Directed in part by the conclusions of Robert Bellah, whom I have just cited, I arrived at a number of tentative conclusions which I shall try to lay out as succinctly as I can.

I believe that nationalist feelings are especially strong in Japan, but I at once wish to qualify what I understand by the term *nationalism*. In its strictest sense, as the word itself suggests, the term refers to a certain relationship to or a disposition towards a “nation-state” whose sovereignty rests in the people who make it up. In that sense, one can only speak properly of Japanese nationalism after the Meiji Restoration, and perhaps then only with reservations. In any case, what I mean by nationalism is something more basic—perhaps I should say more primitive—that is not bound to the structure of the state as such but can be traced much farther back in Japan’s history. We might call this a “particularism” or a concentration on what Tanabe meant by *種* or “species,” which entails a corresponding belittling of both the individual and the universal or transcendent. It is a question of the preponderance of the social nexus over the individuals and over the transcendent of which Nakamura Hajime speaks. One sees here the two elements of which Bellah speaks: “Correlative with the sense of uniqueness is a strong feeling of identification which Japanese people feel with their culture.”

Under *culture* I mean to include also race (血縁, ancestors) and soil (氏, 神国), which then, in historical perspective, allows us to speak of a prevalence of the Shinto ethos (which, as a “tribal religion,” is particularist) over the Buddhist ethos (which, as a “historical religion,” is supposed to be centered on a transcendent universal and on the individual). I would then add, as a final qualification, that this Japanese particularism is strongly pervaded by a remarkably flexible notion of the family that was able to radiate from the center of the “Imperial Family.” Thus Bellah concludes: “If there was any structural reference at all [in Japanese particularism] it was not to the nation but rather…to the imperial dynasty.”

The next question is unavoidable: why should the Japanese people be more nationalistic than most other peoples? Although it is hard to find a really satisfactory explanation, it is not an entirely unintelligible phenomenon. As

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10 R. Bellah, “Japan’s Cultural Identity,” 573.
11 R. Bellah, “Japan’s Cultural Identity,” 574.
for why it should be so difficult to explain, this is at least in part due to the
mystery of how, despite the successful implantation and centuries-long pre-
ance of a historical religion, Shinto and its ethos as a tribal religion should
have survived for so many centuries. In looking for factors that help us to
understand, one thinks first of the term *shimaguni* (島国, island country),
which Japanese even today point to as a distinguishing trait. But more cogent
than geographical circumstance are the historical conditions that come into
play. Affirmations of the particularity (or superiority) of the group to which
one belongs are, after all, a way of satisfying the psychological need for self-
respect and defending one’s identity against what are perceived as outside
threats. Throughout its history Japan seems to have felt the menace of out-
side forces overshadowing it or threatening to absorb it. The greatest and
most enduring intimidation lay of course in China, to which Japan owes most
of the elements of its culture. In order to strengthen its self-identity and
reaffirm its *yamato-damash‡* (大和魂), Japan needed a number of long periods
of seclusion during which it closed its doors to Chinese influence.

The introduction of Buddhism into the picture further compounds the
mystery. Although received by Japan as part of the Chinese cultural package,
Buddhism never lost the vestiges of its birth in India. In the Buddhist scheme
of things, Japan is a latecomer, a small backwater off the mainstream of reli-
gious history. Judging from Japanese literature, especially its Buddhist litera-
ture, this consciousness must have been very strong among the ancient
Japanese. Indeed, the survival of Shinto may have something to do with a
rebellion against this self-image.

When we come to modern times, especially since the end of feudalism in
Japan, Western culture with its technical and military superiority replaces
China as the force that keeps Japan in a position of inferiority and makes its
identity problematic. Forces that had once stood in opposition join together
to form a bulwark against the new threat. Things Chinese and things
Japanese come to be seen together as Eastern culture; Buddhism and Shinto
form the common, native religious front against Christianity, the religion of
the West. Meantime, the need for a particularly *Japanese* identity within this
larger Eastern identity remains as strong as ever. In the early years of the
Shôwa period, this two-sided problem of Japanese identity reached a high
pitch. As Bellah writes, “The Pacific War posed for Japan the profoundest
problems of its cultural identity—the relation of Eastern to Western culture
and the relation of the Japanese past to the modern era.”

All of this, I repeat, is not meant to “explain” Japan’s nationalism. But I
find it relevant that each of these ingredients resurfaces in the official nation-
alist rhetoric of the war as well as in the writings of the Kyoto school.

12 R. Bellah, “Japan’s Cultural Identity,” 579.
Nowhere is this as blatant as in the so-called nihonjinron (日本人論) literature. I cannot go as far as Robert Sharf when he writes that “Suzuki, like Nishida, placed his reading of Buddhist history in the interests of the most specious forms of nihonjinron.” But at the same time, there is no denying the fact that the same preoccupation with Japan’s identity and unicity, albeit on a higher level of sophistication, pervades the writings of the Kyoto school, especially in the critical years of the war.

To try to understand nationalism is not, of course, to approve of it. In healthy doses it may merit the more acceptable labels of “patriotism” or “love of country,” but an overdose quickly breaks out in the “group egoism” of which Toynbee spoke. On the one hand, a rational, objective view of the outside world is made impossible; on the other, individual citizens within the country are made subservient to a greater, national totality.

Assumptions

For my part, I have no wish either to play the devil’s advocate or to lend my voice to a simple apologia pro schola kyotoense. On this latter point, I begin by conceding at least the following two points.

First, the Kyoto philosophers did not, during the period in question, keep a philosophical composure but were swept up in the general nationalistic tide, even to the point of making some rather irrational declarations that they would not have made in calmer circumstances. One thinks particularly, though not only, of the famous Chūkōkōron discussion. On this point, I find a defense of the Kyoto philosophers in question, like the one offered by Hanazawa Hidefumi (in the course of an otherwise most instructive essay), not only unconvincing but counterproductive. I cannot agree with Hanazawa in dismissing out of hand Ienaga Saburō’s impression of these conversations as no more than “the tall talk of drunkards.” Here we see a group of intellectuals stumbling about in a kind of euphoric daze, groggy with the excitement of a war and its coming adventures. In their paean for the war effort, no mention is ever made of the immense suffering it is inflicting. No doubt, however faint, is raised concerning the rightness of its cause or the certain victory that awaits Japan. No one bothers to question the right of one people to judge itself superior and destined to dominate the East Asian sphere. What kind of a detour must conscience make to go along with Nishitani’s plea to make other Eastern high-quality peoples into “half-Japanese,” or the musings by the participants about the destiny of the Korean people, capped off by

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15 CK, 262–3.
Kōsaka’s declaration that “by becoming Japanese in a broad sense, the true historicity of the Koreans will come to life”?16 Had they bothered soberly to consult their own philosophies, surely these men would have spoken differently. To be sure, their high erudition is everywhere in evidence; and to be fair, many of the points they make are well taken and, in hindsight, even look at times prophetic. I refer, for instance, to Nishitani’s wish that “all-out war” be seen as transcending wartime and peacetime: “Seen as the energy to fight, military strength transcends the traditional, narrow understanding of ‘fighting’ and continues into the so-called ‘postwar’ period.”17 Given the current world situation, it is hard to deny that, after all, the fighting spirit of the Japanese in the postwar period did in a sense make them the “real winners of the war.”

A comment of Himi Kiyoshi seems to suggest, however, that the Chūkōron discussions are not the only case in point. Noting that one might have expected the “rationalist” Tanabe to see through the official emperor ideology, Himi notes:

In fact, Tanabe did not remain free from the spell of the dominating ideology of modern Japan.... Thus, because of subjective limitations, he sacrificed his rationalist thought to the affirmation and praise of the Japanese state.18

A second point I wish to concede from the start is that the attitude and writings of the Kyoto philosophers during the critical period were on the whole supportive of national policies in general and of the war effort in particular. It is true that they distanced themselves from certain of the excesses of the totalitarian nationalism and warned of the dangers, thus incurring the wrath of extremist factions (especially among the ground forces). In contrast to the irrationalistic tenor that pervaded the official ideology, they advocated clear reasoning; in opposition to an exclusive focus on the Japanese state, they insisted on the need for individual creativity and a global, world-historical outlook; against the absoluteness of state Shinto, they upheld the importance of the Buddhist contribution. Moreover, it seems that some of the Kyoto philosophers collaborated with political forces aimed at moderating some of the excesses of the war policy. Still, one must say that by and large their ideas and pronouncements were sufficiently in line with the national polity to have wrought a reassuring effect on intellectuals too sophisticated to swallow the

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16 CK, 339.
17 CK, 291.
raw form in which the war ideology was being rationed out, and to have offered students an honorable cause for which to die fighting.

In making these concessions I do not, however, mean to offer them as evidence on which to assess the personal integrity of the Kyoto philosophers or from which to apportion guilt. I find myself unable to detect in them any sign of clear duplicity—speaking directly against their better judgment—or opportunism or cowardice. Subjectively, we can say no more than that they served their country in the state it was in, as loyal subjects (and for those at imperial universities, as employees).

In this respect, their attitude after the end of the war is telling. Nishida did not himself outlive the war, of course. Those who did, such as Nishitani and Kōyama, never made a public apology for their wartime activities. Indeed, Kōyama insisted that what he did during the war, and especially his collaboration with the navy, was done “on the basis of deep reflection and resolve, and my evident duty as an intellectual employed by a state university.”¹⁹ Once the war was over, Tanabe began to talk openly and at length of the need for metanoia, and in that sense seemed to have acknowledged guilt both personal and collective. I say “seemed to,” because in all honesty I cannot pin down for myself just what those ideas meant in the concrete. Was his metanoetics basically anything more than an expression of the shock brought about by direct encounter with the fallibility and gullibility of human reason? I have a difficult time reading much more into even his clearest admission of “guilt”:

All my teachings on this matter [the state and its relationship to religion] have failed to be really concrete, and it cannot be denied that, because of their abstractness, they have given rise to the trend of the absoluteness of the state …. I cannot gainsay that they contained the possibility of being used as a rationale for a particular state [policy].²⁰

As for Watsuji, Bellah argues that he may not have made any clear apology but that his views on Japanese history certainly underwent a great change.²¹ Nishitani, on the other hand, is something of an enigma. Are we to conclude from his silence that Nishitani never retracted his wartime ideas? Or perhaps that he simply left behind the “extravagancies” of his youth as a matter of course, but, rather than publicly alter his basic ideas about the state, preferred to avoid the question and devote himself more exclusively to meta-

¹⁹ As quoted in Hanazawa Hidefumi, “Kōyama Iwao,” 1.
²⁰ 種の論理の弁証法 [The dialectics of the logic of species], THZ 7:336–7.
physics and religion, at least after 1952? If so, James Heisig’s remark may be to the point:

The irony is that, in a sense, the failure of Japan’s nationalistic aims was a victory for the true aims of the Kyoto philosophers, calling them less to a laundering of their image than to a return to their fundamental inspirations.22

To sum up, then, I am suggesting that the judgment that is ours to make is not on the Kyoto philosophers as persons—whether they were nationalists or not—but only on the relationship of their philosophy to nationalism. This brings me to the principal query of this essay: Is Kyoto philosophy as such intrinsically nationalistic?

IS KYOTO PHILOSOPHY INTRINSICALLY NATIONALISTIC?

On the basis of my preliminary remarks, I would like now to draw the question closer to home. It is not merely a question of the nationalism that may or may not be present in the Kyoto philosophers, but also of what remains of it in our own attempts to work with the legacy of their ideas. In this sense, the nature of the investigation shifts from witch hunt to exorcism, from autopsy to disinfection.

Harking back to the first lessons I learned in philosophy, that half the answer lies in understanding the question, I would like to try to tease out various possible meanings to the statement, “Kyoto philosophy is nationalistic” and only then try to refine an answer.

I suggest we begin by eliminating a reading of the phrase as an instance of a general rule that all philosophy (and for that matter, all religion) is in part ideological and therefore bears within it covert agenda and hidden loyalties to nation, sect, class, gender, and so forth. Surely this kind of blanket condemnation is unsuitable as a working norm.

22 James Heisig, “The Religious Philosophy of the Kyoto School,” RPTH, 15. In several essays written between 1946 and 1952 Nishitani expressed views on political questions, on the war, and on the “narrow nationalism” at work in it. In these essays he generally takes an objective point of view, without the slightest reference to the role he himself may have played in the course of events. To the best of my knowledge, there are only two exceptions to this. In a private memorandum originally composed around 1946 but published for the first time in 1987 as an afterword to the reissue of View of the World, View of the Nation (1941) as volume 4 of his Collected Writings, Nishitani defends the soundness of his intentions. And in direct response to an attack by Ichikawa Hakugen aimed mainly at Nishitani’s pronouncements in the Chūkōron discussions, he defines the nature of his “collaboration in the war” and defends it as right. See 自衛についての再論 [Another argument on self-defense], 中央公論 (1 May 1952): 21–32. After that, again as far as I have been able to determine, there is only silence.
In the first place, then, we have the strongest, most direct reading of the statement: that nationalism is the fundamental inspiration of a particular thought system. In other words, abstracting from its nationalism, there is no system left. I have never read Hitler’s Mein Kampf myself, but I imagine that it would qualify for just such a judgment.

Secondly, the phrase may be taken to mean that nationalism, while not the fundamental inspiration of the thought system, is one of its main determinants. In this case, the nationalistic element must be taken fully into consideration by anyone who wants to understand the system as such. It may be possible to pry the nationalistic elements loose from the philosophy as a whole without serious loss of content and meaning, but even so the possibility of a subtler, undetected taint can never be discounted.

A third reading of the statement is that nationalistic elements are to be found in at least some of the texts in question, but are judged out of line with the thought as a whole, a mere accretion at the periphery or a temporary deviation from its principal aims. There are two possibilities here. On the one hand, nationalistic accretions could be considered a pure and simple betrayal of everything the philosopher’s thought stands for, products of a temporary myopia or stress. While absolving the philosophical system of all blame, this reading tends to cast a dark shadow on the personal integrity of the philosopher in question. On the other hand, nationalistic accretions could be judged secondary, adventitious elements that might have been prompted by unusual historical circumstances but that nevertheless are linked organically to the philosophical system. In this case one looks to the deeper layers of the thought either for a positive propensity to nationalism or for the absence of sufficient defense against the onslaught of nationalistic ideas.

As soon as one tries to lay this schema on the history of the Kyoto school, the luxury of logical distinctions soon becomes an inconvenience. For one thing, not all the philosophers associated with the school can be placed in the same slot. For another, not all these thinkers maintained a consistent position during the period in question. In view of the diverse ways in which each of them developed, in greater or lesser proximity to Nishida, the origi-
nal inspiration of what we are calling “Kyoto philosophy,” we have no choice but to take each case individually or at least divide them into groups, in order to shade their several associations with “nationalism.” Clearly this is a task too large for a single essay—and in any case, too demanding for my own resources. I will therefore limit my remarks to the trunk-line thinkers of the Kyoto school, who also happen to be best known outside of Japan: Nishida Kitarō, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishitani Keiji. I shall furthermore begin with the presupposition that some meaning of the term nationalistic can be applied to these scholars, and shall assume—until evidence to the contrary persuades me otherwise—that each shared the same kind of nationalism.

The first question is whether the thinking of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani can be called nationalistic in the first and strongest sense. I submit that it cannot, since the central preoccupations of these thinkers, the fundamental inspiration of their philosophy, do not belong to the social, political, or even ethical realms but rather to the “transcendent,” metaphysical, religious, and in some sense therefore to the aesthetic realm. Theirs is not a philosophy of “objective spirit” but of “Absoluter Geist.”

This is clear enough for Nishida himself, who came to questions of the state only late in his career. The same holds true for Nishitani, though I qualify this by noting that in the critical period of Japan’s military adventures, much of his thinking turned around history and the state. I do not agree with R. Kambartel, who sees in Nishitani’s 1941 book View of the World, View of the Nation a pure ideology of the state:

...In the end, what is developed in this book is not philosophy of religion but ideology of the state: Nishitani here uses his philosophy of religion ….for the promotion and justification of a totalitarian usurpation of the individual by the state, of a total sacrifice of the individual to the state.24

Moreover, I believe we can say of Tanabe as well that, notwithstanding his valiant efforts to bring his thinking down to earth by shifting the focus to “species” or “objective spirit,” his primary concerns were far from socio-political. At the same time, given the importance of the state this implied, Tanabe may have been more vulnerable to nationalistic temptations than Nishida and Nishitani were. In a different context, Nishitani substantially makes the same point:

Indeed it is my impression that a close examination of the points of Nishida’s philosophy that Tanabe criticized reveals that Nishida’s views

often are surprisingly similar to Tanabe’s own. In particular their philosophies share a distinctive and common basis that sets them apart from traditional Western philosophy: absolute nothingness.\(^{25}\)

Having made this claim of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, however, I do not assume that this is true across the spectrum of Kyoto-school philosophers. For example, despite his frequent use of Nishida’s basic terms, Watsuji’s thinking focused directly on the ethical realm and the social nexus in a way that is absent in Nishida. Or again, Kōyama, Kōsaka, and Suzuki Shigetaka, whose prime interest seems to have been the philosophy of history, belong to a different branch.

The second step in our inquiry is rather more delicate. If the three trunk-line thinkers of the Kyoto school are not nationalistic ideologues in the strong sense of the term, how shall we classify the nationalistic elements they contain? The further I have delved into this question, the clearer it has become to me that the nationalistic-sounding pronouncements\(^{26}\) of Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani are not simply turns of phrase or idle thoughts without any organic link to the body of their philosophical thinking. I therefore answer the title question of this essay in the affirmative. Kyoto philosophy is intrinsically nationalistic. The problem for me is rather with the nature of the intrinsicality. Was it strong enough to be one of the major inspirations or determining elements in Kyoto philosophy, or was it merely an adventitious and secondary element in it?

The question does not limit itself to whether or not certain declarations by the Kyoto philosophers made during a time of high crisis must be called nationalist or not, but rather extends into a question about the nature of the Kyoto philosophy per se as a historical endeavor. I realize that I am not qualified on my own to answer the question, and that even to try would take me well afield of the material I have gathered for the present essay. I content myself therefore with a summary presentation of why academic honesty compels me to find Kyoto philosophy “intrinsically nationalistic.”

Engaged Philosophizing

In my view, it was one of the principal virtues of Kyoto philosophy that made it most vulnerable to nationalism. In other words, the very point that makes this philosophy most interesting and worth studying for the Western scholar

\(^{25}\) NK, 161.

\(^{26}\) It seems that it is the nationalist talks and writings of the Kyoto philosophers, and almost never their activities, that are brought into question. This contrasts with the case of Heidegger, in whose writings it is hard to discover pronouncements that come near to Nazi tenets, but whose Nazi activities seem by now well documented.
is the point of its strongest affinity to the nationalistic agenda. That is, the Kyoto-school thinkers, as distinct from the purely historical approach pursued at most Japanese faculties of (Western) philosophy, aimed at an “authentic” or “existential” philosophizing. Theirs was a philosophy born of reflection on human existence in the concrete, which included both the general and particular historical, religious, and cultural background as well as individual experience and circumstances.

I mentioned earlier that the fundamental inspiration of the central Kyoto philosophers was metaphysical and religious. I would add that therefore—especially from their Buddhist perspective—their central concern was not with the state but with the individual and its authentic existence, with what they call the “true self.” Like most Japanese scholarship since the Meiji Restoration, the Kyoto philosophers cultivated a voracious appetite for Western materials. But as philosophers of a country that had become the crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures, and was consequently threatened with a loss of identity in the face of the imposing Western presence, their very openness to Western ideas required the counterbalance of their own heritage. By engaging in philosophy from the standpoint of a particular Eastern tradition, they were able to see Western ideas and systems with new eyes, to detect many shortcomings that had escaped the Western keepers of the philosophical tradition. What is clear to us today is that this new eye was not entirely innocent, but in part—perhaps inevitably—predisposed to defend the identity and glories of Eastern culture, especially in its Japanese forms.

In this connection, I have often been struck (and have said this on a number of occasions) by a certain strain of ambiguity in the writings of Nishitani Keiji, the Kyoto philosopher with whom I am most familiar. In general, his formulations seem to go like this: both Eastern and Western cultures, nothingness and being, Buddhism and Christianity, have their strengths and weaknesses; both are part of our present problems and neither suffices by itself to lead us into the future; therefore, a higher synthesis of the two is needed. At the same time, Nishitani often intimates that this higher synthesis is, in fact, already present, whether only in principle or already in embryo, in Eastern culture. At times he suggests that while Japan is part of the problem, it already has a solution at hand in its own tradition.

This tendency is not restricted to Nishitani alone. In Nishida’s lecture to the Emperor of 23 January 1941, he argued that the nation-state that present-day history requires must be a synthesis that takes up into itself totalism (全体主義) and individualism. He then goes on to say:

In the history of our country, the whole does not stand in opposition to the individuals, nor the individuals to the whole, but the whole and the
individuals have known a lively development while mutually negating one another with the imperial family as their center.27

Tanabe’s “logic of species,” as Himi Kiyoshi points out, contains a comparable ambiguity. Although ostensibly writing a general philosophy of the state, Tanabe had only the current Japanese state in mind. In this way he conflated the ideal state and the actual state of Japan. His reference to the ideal state as an “avatar-existence of the Absolute” or an “absolute relative” in fact glorified the warring Japanese state of his own day.28

As for Nishitani, long ago and in a context completely unrelated to questions of nationalism, I wrote the following:

It is Nishitani’s conviction that Japanese traditional culture, and especially its Mahāyāna Buddhist component, carries the necessary elements for a solution of the modern problems not only of Japanese society, but also of Western culture.29

A few examples may help to illustrate the point. In taking up the problem of religion and science, Nishitani argues that traditional religions have yet to tackle this problem seriously. “I am convinced,” he adds, “that the basis for overcoming this difficulty has long since been laid in Buddhism.”30 In Religion and Nothingness, one finds a similar line of argument. After a rather sweeping statement to the effect that “up until now, religions have…put the emphasis exclusively on the aspect of life,” he at once discloses the missing aspect of death in Buddhism.31 Or again, in more direct relation to Japanese culture as such, we find remarks like the following:

There is no turning back to the way things were. What is past is dead and gone, only to be repudiated or subjected to radical criticism. The tradition must be rediscovered from the ultimate point where it is grasped as containing in advance “the end” or eschaton of our westernization and of Western civilization itself.32

28 Himi Kiyoshi, A Study of Tanabe’s Philosophy, 121–4.
31 RN, 50. I have omitted the words “tended to,” because, while making the English more elegant, they are not present in the original.
The clearest example, and one that applies to all three philosophers with only minor differences of emphasis, is the notion of absolute nothingness. The idea is fraught with ambiguity from the start. On the one hand, it is presented as transcending (Western) being and (Eastern) nothingness. On the other, it is located in the Eastern tradition, most clearly in the form of Buddhist emptiness, which sometimes merits it the name of “Oriental nothingness” (東洋的無). It is on this point that David Dilworth has accused Nishida of “regionalism” in his reasoning, of “an ambiguous mixture of metaphysical pronouncements and cultural-regional underpinning,” and “an appeal to a privileged and unique experience, based on a special historical and geographical standpoint.”

Such a mixture is present in the term “Oriental Nothingness,” which we encounter frequently in the works of Nishida and his disciples. This concept becomes the basis for an apologetic and exclusivist attitude—an attitude which may be interesting in its own context, but is misplaced on the level of philosophical discourse.\(^{33}\)

A variation of the same tendency appears in the presentation of Japanese Buddhism, especially the “New Buddhism” of the Kamakura Era, as the zenith of perfection of Mahāyāna Buddhism, and, at the same time, in the identification of Mahāyāna Buddhism (especially Zen) with the “true spirit” of Japan and its religiosity or “spirituality.” The suspicion that this is merely a covert way of elevating Japanese particularity to a higher, more universal status is irrepresible. Examples of this kind of statement are legion, but I limit myself to a few:

Present-day Buddhists have forgotten such a true meaning of the Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle). Eastern culture must arise again from such a standpoint. It must contribute a new light to world culture. As the self-determination of the absolute present, the national polity (kokutai) of Japan is a norm of historical action in such a perspective. The above-mentioned true spirit of the Mahāyāna is in the East preserved today only in Japan.\(^{34}\)

I think that Japanese Buddhism, Japanized as it is by Japanese polity (kokutai) thought, contains in itself the spirit needed to carry on the creation of a new age…. In this sense the principle for the building of the

\(^{33}\) David Dilworth, “Regionalism in the thought of Nishida,” JAN VAN BRAGT

\(^{34}\) Nishida Kitarō, “Towards a Philosophy of Religion with the Concept of Pre-established Harmony as Guide,” The Eastern Buddhist 3/1 (1970): 36. Nishida wrote this text in 1944, about a year before his death.
new age shows up within the spirit of Japanized Mahāyāna Buddhism. In this way we recognize the great significance for world history of the building up of East Asia under Japanese leadership.  

As for Nishitani, a clear and elaborate example can be found in the fourth chapter of his *View of the World, View of the Nation*. There, he distinguishes Eastern intellect from its Western counterpart, and finds the difference to lie in the absence of any separation in the East between worldview and (religious) practice. Nishitani sees this Eastern intellect as having reached its culmination in Japan, which naturally leads to a simplification that permits it to pervade the daily life of the people as an ethos. This ethos is visible in Shinto’s “way of the Gods” (神の道), but even more so in Kamakura Buddhism.  

Among the philosophers of the Kyoto school, I have the impression that this line of reasoning is strongest in D. T. Suzuki, though Watsuji may also join him here:  

In *Ethics as the Science of Man* (1931) and the first volume of *Ethics* (1937), Watsuji developed in detail the dialectical negation of individual and group in the absolute whole, which is then related to an essentially Buddhist metaphysical underpinning on the one hand, and the specifically Japanese *gemeinschaft* community and its emperor on the other.  

In view of their existential style of Kyoto-school philosophizing, it is not surprising to find more and more attention being given to the “philosophical position” of the state as Japan found itself in a deepening period of crisis and as ultranationalism grew stronger. I have already noted what I consider the influence of the general mood of the time on their philosophical thinking. For the sake of balance, I would only repeat that they never mustered their writings to the bugle of the ultranationalists or kowtowed to the concrete political agenda of the official party line.  

In this context, it is worth noting that where the idea of the state was concerned, the Kyoto philosophers did not draw on the philosophers of the phenomenological school, whose influence in other respects was considerable. Klaus Held attributes this to the fact that “in Husserl’s and Heidegger’s analysis of the human being’s openness to the world, a particularly significant kind of world was not recognized as world: the political dimension.” In other words, since the leading phenomenologists saw “public life” as just

35 THZ 8:166–7.  
37 R. Bellah, “Japan’s Cultural Identity,” 584.  
another instance of the inauthentic existence of *das Man*, the Kyoto philosophers turned to other sources of a more nationalistic stamp: traditional Japanese ideas, some twentieth-century theoreticians of the state (mainly German), and Hegel (who, after all, was thought to have absolutized the Prussian state). While this argues against any direct link between Heidegger and the Kyoto philosophers on the idea of the state, it only highlights the irony of the fact that both sides, each in its own way, betrayed the centrality of the authentic individual in a state-centered totalitarianism. Again, Held:

Surely it must serve as food for thought that it was precisely Heidegger, the phenomenologist of authenticity, who could come to think that the movement led by Hitler would end up as the awakening of an entire people to the epochal authenticity of political life.39

One can hardly resist the thought that the two philosophical systems shared a common weakness.

*Immanent Transcendence*

“For Japan, however, the state is not simply objective spirit, but is objective spirit as the expression of the Absolute Spirit.”40

I am persuaded that a calm reading of the texts of the principal Kyoto philosophers at the height of the critical years of the war will show them to have been utterly sincere in departing from the official nationalist ideology to stress the importance of the individual as a creative agent, to urge an international, world-historical outlook, and to relativize the position of state Shinto. The question is whether this sincerity was solidly anchored in their basic philosophical ideas or not. Here again, I begin with my own conclusion.

It seems to me that Kyoto philosophy did not in fact contain a sufficiently critical stance against nationalist tendencies to be able to take a stance in time of crisis. In saying so, I mean to stress again that establishing links with nationalism was not a necessary consequence of the ideas of the Kyoto philosophers, and yet that the bonds that did eventually form are not as surprising, unnatural, or illogical as they perhaps should have been.41 I begin with two texts that reflect the same conclusion:

We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that in essence Nishida’s philosophy is intrinsically such that it could not work effectively to restrain the pre-

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40 Nishitani Keiji, CK, 395.
41 Might we not say that it is easier to find a basis for the charge of nationalism, even if only in negative form, in the Kyoto philosophers than it is in Heidegger’s writings?
war course that led to a militarization of the country, and that eventually it would end up affirming and sanctioning the existing situation.42

Yet Watsuji, as he himself was later fully aware, made no effective resistance to the tendencies leading Japan to disaster. Indeed, the position which he had worked out did not give any basis for individual or social resistance.43

In digging around for the roots of this lack of power to resist, I find myself coming back again and again to what I can only call the “Mahāyāna character” of Kyoto philosophy. I base this judgment on the idea that the rise of historical religions with a clear concept of transcendence made possible for the first time the de-absolutization of the tribe and the emergence of the individual; and that, while original Buddhism posited a clear transcendence in its idea of nirvana, that clarity was weakened in Mahāyāna by a stress on nirvana-sive-samsara. No doubt the shift made possible great gains for Buddhism, but I also feel that something momentous was lost or at least endangered—namely, the refusal to identify the Absolute with anything this-worldly and with it the “absolute” grounding of the individual. Reference could be made here to the historical fact that “it was the idea right from the beginning of its transmission to Japan, that Buddhism is the Dharma for the protection of the state,”44 and the relative ease with which Buddha Law and King’s Law were joined together and even identified in the Buddhism of Japan.

Two points are worth recalling here. First, Kyoto philosophy is root and branch a religious philosophy, which means that it also views the state rather directly from the standpoint of religion. In this sense it always stands perilously close to sacralizing the state. Second, as a philosophical tradition it clearly situates itself within the ambit of Far Eastern Mahāyāna with its “immanent” (and one must add, often ambivalent) transcendence. Taken together, these two elements account for the tendency, visible in the relevant works of the Kyoto philosophers, to nudge the state in the direction of the Absolute—whether as a mediating force or as a concrete embodiment—or conversely to see the Absolute as immanent in the state. In Tanabe’s later writings we find an explicit recognition of this:

[Before my metanoia], Nothingness [in my thinking] lacked transcendence. This unavoidably brought about the following consequences: on

42 山本誠作 Yamamoto Seisaku, 無とプロセス [Nothingness and process] (Kyoto: Kōrosha, 1987), 118.
the one hand, it usurped the character of the individual as subject, and for that very reason made its transcendence immanent in and one with the individual as subject; on the other hand, nothingness became identified with the species-like substratum, and in so doing absolutized the state.45

Examples of this conflation of the Absolute and the state wherein the self-negation demanded by (religious) nothingness is conveniently aligned to the self-negation that the totalitarian state demands of its citizens, are not hard to find. The statement from Nishitani with which I opened this section is typical. To prepare the way for my next and final point, however, I prefer to draw attention to the danger to which the idea of absolute nothingness or emptiness (including its most current interpretations) all too easily exposes the individual subject. When emptiness is seen onesidedly as nondual (不二) instead of not-one not-two (不一不二), and when it is interpreted as an “absolute totality” instead of as an infinite horizon, its absolute negation can never return to an affirmation of the individual. This kind of interpretation is especially clear in Watsuji. For example:

…established betweenness is, in its extreme, an absolute totality in which self and other are not-two. It is the authentic face one had before one’s parents were born. In other words, when all is said and done this is the authenticity out of which we emerge. Moreover, potential betweenness is ultimately that same absolute totality of the nonduality of self and other…. And the more close-knit a society is, the stronger does it [authentic absolute totality] become.46

In such a view, emptiness or absolute nothingness condemns all multiplicity and otherness as inauthentic and finally disposable. What we end up with is an ontological monism or totalism, which in turn readily leaves itself open to the support of state absolutism.

Absolute Nothingness and Human Rights

This brings us to one final defining mark of Kyoto philosophy that might also be construed as facilitating nationalism, or at least as eroding the status of the individual within the state. The point is put succinctly by Kitamori Kazō: “Absolute Nothingness makes it impossible in the end to consider the ‘contradictions’ of this world as tragic contradictions; it slants one in the direction of esthetic contemplation.”47 In other words, the sweeping, all-encompassing

45 THZ 7:367.
47 北森嘉蔵, as quoted in Yamamoto Seisaku, Nothingness and Process, 118.
negation of absolute nothingness seems to take away all opposition, all tension and evil. It seems to wipe away every imperfection of actual human life by proclaiming a higher standpoint from which all such things are seen to be non-existent or illusory. I do not wish to challenge the value, the incalculable value, of such a standpoint for religion—provided that it opens a path back to a heightened awareness of the actual contradictions, beautiful or tragic as they may be, provided that it elaborate this path in sufficient detail to constitute a norm for our imperfect attempts at being fully human.

In this regard, one thinks at once of the contradictions between I and Thou, between individual and state, between good and evil. Did Kyoto philosophy, for example, live up to this ideal in countenancing the contradiction between the individual and the state? Did they take seriously the centuries-long history of the struggle for the rights of individuals within the state? Did they even consider such a struggle as truly real and authentic? The evidence suggests that, at least where Japan was concerned, they were rather inclined to think of a direct harmony (wa, は) between individual and state, and to gloss over its tragic elements; and as a result, to look down on imported ideas of equality, individual freedom, and democracy, and the actual struggles of real good against real evil of which these ideas speak.48

In a short reflection on ethics in Nishitani’s Religion and Nothingness,” David Little has looked at the ongoing international battle on behalf of human rights and asks where one can find a solid basis for that struggle in Nishitani’s thinking.49 From his own experience in the United Nations, he points out that historically this struggle has been waged on the basis of a rather commonsense, Kantian ethic that presupposes “other selves whose autonomy and integrity ought to be respected and promoted in harmony and mutuality.” Thus, when he sees Nishitani trying to “radicalize” this Kantian ethic from the standpoint of emptiness with its negation of the otherness of the I and Thou,50 he cannot help fearing that the imperfect, but somehow functioning, normative base has been taken away with nothing to replace it. Particularly problematic for him is the following passage from Nishitani:

We have to kill the self absolutely..., breaking through the field where self and other are discriminated from one another and made relative to one another. The self itself returns to its own home-ground by killing every “other,” and, consequently, killing itself.51

48 This tendency appears in its strongest form in the Chūkōron discussions. See, for example, CK, 349–57.
50 RN, 272ff.
51 RN, 263.
I have to agree with Little when he suggests that Nishitani does not step down far enough from the lofty heights of emptiness to reach the human condition in its concrete actuality. “While I understand what Nishitani is saying (the formulations are intelligible in one sense), I do not understand what they mean for action, and especially for the web of dutiful relations.”  

Nishitani’s texts indeed give the impression—something which, I might add, he would have fiercely denied—that he does not particularly care about imperfect principles and norms being abolished because ideally they well up spontaneously from that deepest, pure core where the self is one with emptiness.

I also share Little’s discomfort with the sweeping and symmetrical negation of I and Thou in the quoted passage. “Dutiful relations” are not, after all, focused on the rights of the I (they rather limit them) but on the “absolute” rights of the Thou, the Other in its irreducible individuality. Elsewhere Nishitani vents his negative feelings toward all the talk about “human rights” much more explicitly, stating that they seem to him only to underline the will and power of the I.  

But why cannot human rights be seen, as I believe indeed they are seen, as first of all stressing the rights of the Other?

The symmetrical negation of I and Thou leaves the individual with no ground to stand on, neither towards other individuals nor vis-à-vis the state. I further resist the attempt to equate the I-Thou relationship—as Buddhist theory and Kyoto philosophy both constantly do—with the subject-object relationship. True individuality can be sustained only in a context where “otherness” is final and not reducible to any totality, be it history, absolute nothingness, or (a pantheistic) God. I conclude with two brief citations from Emmanuel Lévinas, whose writings have reconfirmed me in my convictions:

If it [history] claims to integrate myself and the other within an impersonal spirit, this alleged integration is cruelty and injustice, that is, ignores the Other.

…the relation with the Other does not have the same status as the relations given to objectifying thought, where the distinction of terms also reflects their union. The relation between me and the Other does not have the structure formal logic finds in all relations. The terms remain absolute despite the relation in which they find themselves.

53 NKC 17:22–6.