



David Williams, *Defending Japan's Pacific War: The Kyoto School Philosophers and Post-White Power*

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IT IS AN UNEXPECTED THRILL to pick up a book that puts Tanabe Hajime's thought in the philosophical limelight. More often than not he is all but eclipsed by Nishida and Nishitani at home and abroad, the neglected figure of the Kyoto School, the prodigal son who defied Nishida and has had to pay the price ever since. Even after realizing where David Williams was headed with his reading of Tanabe—in a direction very different from my own—I was grateful for the chance to renew my enthusiasm for this singular intellect. Perhaps this is the main reason I was a little disappointed to find that the actual philosophical thought of the man who is called “my favourite among all Japanese philosophers” (xvii), the “leading thinker in the wartime or middle phase of the Kyoto School” (30), and whose thinking is said to represent “a powerful Japanese contribution to the philosophy of subjectivity, of ‘post-White’ reasoning” (150), is given so little attention in the body of the book, barely fifteen pages in all. I am not sure how Tanabe himself would appreciate the cause his ideas are made to serve. His late writings suggest, not very kindly.

Before I lock horns with Williams on this and other questions, let me register my admiration for his achievement. To begin with, he has tried to broaden the background for the question of the complicity of Kyoto School philosophers in the Pacific War effort by linking it, as it should be but often is not in philosophical circles, to the debate within Japan on “modernity” that was current in the Taisho period and continued on until well after the war. Second, he has introduced the problem of Heidegger's association with the Nazi regime as an integral part of his assessment of

Tanabe. Third, he has taken careful issue with two of the major works critical of the Kyoto Schools purported fascism, Hartoonian's *Overcome by Modernity* and Peter Dale's *Myth of Japanese Uniqueness*. Finally, he has presented solid translations of two seminal texts of Tanabe, one of them only recently discovered.

One might think from the title that the book is another attempt to rail against the Kyoto School for defending the war in the Pacific. Nothing of the sort. It means exactly what it says: taking sides with the Kyoto School in defending the war against White power. The thesis is as sweeping as its title is blunt. Williams sees a direct line of continuity from the Western expansion into Asia in the nineteenth century, to the Allied strategies in the Second World War, to the post-war treaties and trials of Japanese war criminals, to the present-day Bush government. He sees this mindset reflected in what he calls an "Allied gaze" that has biased academia against the complexities of Japan's nonconformist, anti-modernity mindset. Against the dominant view of dismissing everything that has rubbed against Japan's military ideology as downright perverse and inhuman, he sets up Tanabe as champion of the very thing the West, and above all, the United States, have yet to learn about their own imperialist, "White power" tendencies. Around these two centers he draws an elliptical orbit for a sort of parallel universe in which he sets out to turn the familiar universe of discussion inside out.

As Williams sees it, the black-and-white judgments of those who condemn the Kyoto School, or at least part of it, as fascist as well as of those who defend it, again as a whole or in part, for opposing the ideology of the day, all suffer from this same habit of thought: to preserve at all costs the fundamental righteousness of the victors in the war, and to evaluate Japanese thinkers according to whether they share the values of the conquerors or not. In attempting to nuance our current image of Tanabe's thought he does not hesitate to shatter the silence on issues that many in the West have considered too risky to ask. Williams is not talking about being careful not to throw out the baby with the bathwater, about condemning the sin and accepting the sinner. He insists that the water was not entirely dirty nor the sin entirely evil, that there is a core of forgotten truth behind the veil that moral righteousness has thrown over the Pacific War: namely, that Japan's need to overcome Western "modernity" and its attempt to do so by subjective self-mastery is an integral part of the picture and was neither defeated nor addressed by the Allied forces and the world order that followed the war.

Williams does not hide his anger at those who have taken a high moral ground towards the Kyoto School, but there is a deeper animus in his prose. (I was reminded at one point of Henrik Ibsen, whose biographer tells us that when he was composing *Brand*, his fiery attack on Christendom's betrayal of Christianity, he kept a bottle on his desk with a scorpion inside. Occasionally he would throw in a piece of fruit and as the scorpion attacked it the venom would flow from his pen in sympathy.) What has Williams pinned in a corner and flaying about is the arrogant ideology of White power. Confident that it is doomed to fail in the years ahead, he is determined to drag down the philosophical world that has sided, wittingly or not, with

the effort to keep Japan and the rest of the non-White world in its place. The shades of gray that this requires for those reading philosophical texts of the Kyoto school composed during the war from the vantage point of the present are real, and, true enough, all but absent in the major literature on the topic. Williams addresses the lack by advancing Tanabe as leader of the “second generation” of Kyoto philosophers (Kōsaka Masaaki, Kōyama Iwao, Suzuki Shigetaka, and Nishitani Keiji) in the battle against Western hegemony. Except for Nishitani, very little is said of these others—indeed, nothing at all of the important source of historical data contained in Hanazawa Hidefumi’s exhaustive study of Kōyama’s papers—and no attempt is made to prove that they in fact considered Tanabe in any sense their spokesman. My own impression, confirmed by everyone I have talked to and everything I have read, is that Tanabe was considered something of an outsider by the circle close to Nishida, and that his impact on the *Chūō kōron* discussions virtually nil. Williams’s vindication of Tanabe fits hand-in-glove his reassessment of Heidegger, the “greatest philosopher of our time” (129), excusing minor failures of judgment in order to claim that Heidegger was trying to sway National Socialism to his own purposes, far removed from the insanity of those who held the reins of government.

What is a little bothersome is that when Williams comes to Nishida and Nishitani, his passion for nuance is lost in generalizations that are difficult to take at face value. Even more startling is his judgment on the scholars gathered together for the symposium that led to the *Rude Awakenings* volume on Zen, the Kyoto School, and the question of nationalism. I found it hard to understand how Williams could dismiss those who disagree with him on the grounds that are so deeply under the enchantment of the “Allied gaze” that they fail to see the facts clearly, or how he could complain that the inclusion of a chapter on a Zen dissenter, Ichikawa Haku-gen, should represent a gross act of historical distortion. The mere fact that nearly all of the assessments, positive and negative, of Kyoto School political writings drew on Japanese authors and original sources in the attempt to rectify the kinds of conclusions found in Hartoonian and Dale, does nothing to mitigate his view. Everything suddenly is black and white to bolster the judgment of “an implicit endorsement of the reasoning behind the victor’s justice meted out by the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal” (34).

I am not sure “post-Whiteness” is the place to locate the core of the Kyoto School’s contribution to philosophy. Nor am I convinced—and here my own work on Tanabe comes under the hammer as much as *Rude Awakenings* does—that the political thought of the major figures of the School is anywhere near the core of their thinking. Part of this has to do with my own idea of what constitutes a “political philosophy” as opposed to the introduction of a social dimension of a general epistemology. Part of it also has to do, in the case of Tanabe, with my belief that his late thought does not undercut the enduring value of his “logic of species” and that his *Philosophy as Metanoetics* is more than a mere “temporary aberration” (116) from it. I tend to locate these questions in the history of philosophical thought. The reproach made against me for failing to pay sufficient attention to the political

history enveloping philosophical texts is one I take very seriously. The volume has opened a wound, and even the grain of salt one is tempted to add here and there only rubs into it. I am not sure if or how to rethink the question, but I would prefer not to stray as far from the internal logic of Tanabe's major philosophical arguments as Williams means to drag me.

I suspect that most readers familiar with the material treated in this book will be at a loss as to how to classify it and where to place its author on the spectrum of opinion. It falls in the genre of sophisticated journalism that makes you so angry you eventually become embarrassed at your own reaction and are forced to stop and rethink some of the things you took for granted. Including the idea that philosophical thought belongs primarily to experts in philosophy.

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