

# Modern Japanese Aesthetics and the Neo-Kantians

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My interest in the interpretative background of modern Japanese aesthetics began with a trip to the University of Kyoto in the spring of 2001. During my visit to the philosophy department, I was told on several occasions that students were reading Hegel, as well as a rather obscure nineteenth-century British Hegelian named Thomas Green, in order to understand the formative ideas of the main philosopher of the school: Nishida Kitarō (1870–1945). However, as I began to immerse myself more in depth in the most representative works of Japanese aesthetics, I came across any number of neo-Kantian authors who were familiar to me from my philosophical training but who were rarely mentioned or given much notice in recent surveys and introductions to the subject (for example, HUME 1995; GARCÍA GUTIÉRREZ 1990; GONZÁLEZ VALLES 2000; MARRA 2001; ODIN 2001). As it turns out, these authors were very important, if not crucial, to the development of leading Japanese philosophers themselves at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth. Although there is ample evidence of this influence to be found in the writings of these Japanese thinkers, the authors themselves seem long since to have fallen out of favor in the university classroom today.

## JAPANESE HUMANISM

Before I consider the influence these authors had, I should also clarify that my intention is to present a picture of the studies of Japanese aesthetics from a historicist perspective in order to appreciate the philosophical period in question as an intellectual movement embedded in particular circumstances, and not to think of it as something that emerged completely finished like the goddess Aphrodite rising up out of the foam. Here I would join those who stress the term “humanism” to characterize Japanese philosophy in general at the time, and the study of Japanese aesthetics in particular (PINCUS 1996, 34; YUSA 2002, 281). This is not matter of mere academic caprice. In fact, there are specific features shared by Renaissance and Japanese humanism that justify the use of the term. Humanism—a word term used by Renaissance philosophers to differentiate themselves from their Medieval counterparts—could be defined as a philosophy that (1) sets the human being and its culture at the center of all philosophical issues, (2) recognizes historicity as the fundamental ground of humanity, and (3) seeks to revive classical culture as a paradigm for constructing and educating society (see KRISTELLER 1979). Japanese humanism displayed all of these features, but rather than being inspired by classical Greece, it took its lead in large measure from nineteenth-century German philosophy, and perhaps above all, from the neo-Kantians.

There are historical and existential reasons why German philosophy became so influential early on in Japan. The records show that during the first decades of the Meiji Restoration, over one hundred and eighty professors were brought from the West to teach in the modern universities in Japan (GONZÁLEZ VALLES 2000, 197). Almost at the same time groups of Japanese scholars began to travel to Europe to become acquainted with the new ideas of the West on their native soil. Tsuda Mamichi 津田真道 (1829–1903) and Nishi Amane 西周 (1829–1897) were among the first to make the trip. Both studied in the Netherlands, but it was Nishi who took the greater interest in philosophy and was more important to the development of modern Japanese aesthetics, not only because he coined many of the basic Western philosophical terms still in use today, but also because he made a first attempt to study the Japa-

nese arts and interpret them through the categories of German idealism. One may admire his courage, even if his efforts were tainted by a certain naivete towards the West. Karl Löwith, who taught in Japan from 1936 to 1941, published a book in 1941 entitled *European Nihilism*, to which he added a postscript for his Japanese readers. In it he expressed his concerns over the indiscriminate adoption of the Western ways by Japan during and after the Meiji Restoration:

When, in the latter half of the last century, Japan came into contact with us and took over our advances with admirable effort and feverish speed, 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 oppose themselves critically to us; instead they first of all took over naively and without critique, everything that filled our best minds with dread.... Japan came to know us only after it was too late, after we ourselves had lost faith in our civilization and the best we had to offer was a self-critique of which Japan took no notice. (LÖWITH 1983, 533-4)

Löwith's harsh remarks require some clarification with regard to the role played by Western philosophy during the early stages of modern thought in Japan. From the outset, Japanese scholars saw in German philosophy a more fruitful ground to interpret their own reality than what was to be found in other philosophical schools from the more industrialized nations they were in contact with, notably, the United States, the Netherlands, and Great Britain. In the humanities neither empiricism nor positivism seemed to provide Japanese scholars with the hermeneutical tools they sought. Why Germany then?

One reason might be that in Japan, as in Germany, industrialization had arrived relatively late, well behind the British, American, and Dutch colonial powers. In addition, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, intellectuals from both countries were looking for a way out of the nihilistic hole they had landed themselves in as a result of suppressing culture and the humanities in favor of an indiscriminate adoption of science and technology as the new beacons of civilization. In short, neither the Japanese nor their German counterparts felt that their rich

cultural heritage was being served by the mass adoption of science and technology they saw going on all about them in everyday life and in the universities.

## HISTORY AND THE ARTS: FENOLLOSA AND HEGEL

The philosophical background of modern Japanese aesthetics had its roots in the University of Tokyo, where two influential foreign professors played a key role in the development of humanism in Japan. The first of them was an American of Spanish descent named Ernest Francisco Fenollosa (1853–1908). A Harvard graduate, Fenollosa taught at the University of Tokyo from 1878 to 1890. He was the first to present Hegel’s philosophy systematically in Japan, and as such represented one of the first attempts to provide students with a hermeneutical foundation for understanding the Japanese arts (PIOVESANA 1969, 25). Needless to say, this meant overcoming Hegel’s limited view of the East in order to give the arts of Japan and other Asian traditions due consideration as objects of study. In Hegelian terms, we might say Japanese scholars had to effect an *Aufhebung* of Hegel’s own thought and “make themselves the object of their own reflection... and thereby reach the highest development possible, namely, a philosophical conception of their life and its conditions” (HEGEL 1970, 12: 39). Fenollosa himself led the way, showing how one could adapt Hegel to explain Japanese aesthetics in a series of books that included *Epochs of Chinese and Japanese Art: An Outline History of East Asiatic Design* (1912), and *Nob or Accomplishment: A Study of the Classical Stage in Japan* (1917).

Okakura Kakuzō (1862–1913), Fenollosa’s most talented student, continued Fenollosa’s Hegelian line of research at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, publishing extensively on the arts of Japan. Okakura followed the historicist approach, insisting that

the arts are deeply rooted in history, like other social phenomena, and are not something that suddenly springs to life like the mythological plant *udumbara*, which blossoms once every three thousand years. (cited in MARRA 1999, 75)

## KOEBER AND NEO-KANTIANISM

The other professor was Raphael von Koeber (1848–1923), through whom, as Nishida wrote in an obituary, “all those today who have come to carry weight in Japanese academic circles with an impressive scholarly style were tempered” (NKZ 13: 177). Koeber, educated in Russia and Germany, arrived in Japan in 1893, three years after Fenollosa had left, and found himself at the theoretical center of a flourishing interest in aesthetics among Japanese intellectuals. The list of Koeber’s students is nothing less than astonishing: Nishida Kitarō, Natsume Sōseki (1867–1916), Abe Jirō (1883–1959), Ōnishi Yoshinori (1888–1959), Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), and Kuki Shūzō (1888–1941), among others.

Koeber built on the historicist ground laid by Fenollosa’s lectures on Hegel at the University of Tokyo. Koeber’s lectures took up the philosophy of art in Schopenhauer, Schiller, Schelling, Dilthey, and the neo-Kantian, Wilhelm Windelband. He also contributed to the introduction of Medieval and ancient Greek thought to Japan. Through him a talented generation of Japanese authors were introduced to a wider range of German authors, resulting in a theoretical basis for some of the most important work on aesthetics in modern Japan. In aesthetics, Koeber placed a special emphasis on the teachings of Schopenhauer. He had already written two books on the philosopher by the time he arrived in Japan: *Schopenhauers Erlösungslehre* (1881) and *Die Philosophie Arthur Schopenhauers* (1888). By exposing his students to Schopenhauer, Koeber was able to teach his students, not to take Kant’s powerful theory of the aesthetic judgment at face value (a lesson taken very seriously by Ōnishi, who published a critical monograph on Kant in 1931), and to see art and its study as a way to overcome the suffering, anxieties, and cultural decadence that plagued the end of the nineteenth century. In another words, aesthetics was set before them as a means to preserve classical culture from destruction, to overcome the dominance of scientific knowledge, and to connect meaningfully with the world as a whole.

Koeber’s approach to teaching history and aesthetics was far from one of abstract and detached reflection. But how could his Japanese students apply the lessons they had learned from European authors to their own particular circumstances? In his 1898 *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Koeber

wrote, “every work of art can be considered an *application* of aesthetical views, theories, and knowledge” (KOEBER 1898, 1). It was through the search for such aesthetical views and theories that he gave his Japanese disciples a sense of direction, inspiring them to focus their talents on something personally relevant: Japan. Furthermore, Koeber stressed from the beginning the importance of self-cultivation and self-examination, encouraging his students to seek new meaning in life through reflection on the arts. In this way the history and living conditions of the philosopher were advanced as an indispensable ingredient in thought.

Through his lectures on German idealism and the hermeneutic strategies of nineteenth-century authors like Dilthey and the neo-Kantians Windelband and Rickert, then, Koeber set the stage for a virtual explosion of cultural studies in Japan. As Sakabe Megumi has remarked, “Koeber sowed the seeds of humanism in Japan” (cited in PINCUS 1996, 34).

This humanism reflected the neo-Kantian side of Koeber’s approach to philosophy. Of the two main currents in neo-Kantian thought, namely, the Marburg school, which followed a more strictly Kantian approach in seeking out the foundations, methods, and limits of knowledge in the natural sciences (and which later took the form of the Vienna Circle), and the Baden School, which followed Dilthey in focusing on the *Geisteswissenschaften*, Koeber’s teachings were closer to the latter. His aim was to direct his students to lay a philosophical basis for studying the cultural forms of the past and to recognize in different historical periods common and unified styles of art, literature, and religion. He thus encouraged them to see that the responsibility of Japanese philosophers of art is to forge their own aesthetic categories rather than simply rely on a simplistic adoption of Western terminology to their own traditions.

Many Japanese students who studied abroad in Germany during this period settled on Heidelberg and Freiburg, the two main intellectual centers of the Baden School. One can hardly discount the influence of Koeber in this regard. Others went to study with Edmund Husserl in Freiburg, where they were introduced to Husserl’s bright young disciple, Martin Heidegger. Japanese scholars who followed Heidegger to study at the University of Marburg often did so expressly to break away from the influence of Paul Natorp and Hermann Cohen.

I know of no Western scholar who has studied in depth the relation-

ship of Raphael von Koeber to the neo-Kantian movement, but one may attribute this to the fact that he spent almost his entire academic career outside of Europe, where he remains relatively unknown. Despite the lack of interest among continental philosophers in the neo-Kantian phenomenon in Japan, there is no denying that “during those years the German influence of neo-Kantianism completely dominated the world of Japanese philosophy” (PIOVESANA 1955, 173), and that, thanks in great part to Koeber and later to Nishida, some of Rickert’s works went through more editions in Japanese than they did in German (RICKERT 1924, VII).

Here we may recall the hard criticism leveled by Löwith and suggest that some current scholars of Japanese philosophy have become so weary of the harmful influence of the West in Japan that they have skipped over much of the positive influence that Western philosophy had in the formative years of some of the most talented intellectuals in Japan—as witnessed in the accounts of the Japanese thinkers themselves. Closer attention to both sides of the Western influence can only help to paint a fuller picture of the origins and complexities of modern Japanese philosophy. As Kaneko Umaji wrote in 1929:

When one considers the effects produced by the recently imported idealist philosophy from Germany, one realizes that it harmonized with the idealist tradition of Japan, developing on one side, the creation of a particular national spirit, and on the other, the stimulation of a native thought. (KANEKO 1929, 7)

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NKZ 『西田幾多郎全集』 [Complete works of Nishida Kitarō] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1965), 19 volumes.

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