

Ex oriente lux?

The Kyoto School and the Problem of Philosophical Modernism

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Abstract: *An influential strand in current research on Japanese philosophy rests on the assumption that Western philosophy has reached an impasse, accompanied by a sense of exhaustion, which it can overcome only by a radical transformation, that is by opening up to insights generated by the tradition of Japanese thought, especially by the Kyoto school commencing with Nishida Kitarō. While I deeply sympathize with the purpose behind this assumption, that is the project of fostering cross-cultural philosophical dialogue, I disagree with its theoretical presuppositions, namely Heidegger's and Nishitani's critique of philosophical modernism. To corroborate my disagreement, I provide a critical examination of Heidegger's concept of "History of Being" and its appropriation by Nishitani and his disciples, before I offer an alternative view on the possible significance of Kyoto school philosophy for the project of cross-cultural dialogue in the context of philosophical modernism. When engaging in this project, I argue, we would be ill-advised to ignore the conceptual resources we find in German Idealism, particularly in Hegel. My argument concludes not that Western philosophy has reached an impasse, but rather that there is a sense of exhaustion in engaging with this philosophy on the side of those who propose its radical transformation.*

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An influential strand in current research on Japanese philosophy rests on the assumption that Western philosophy has reached an impasse it can overcome only by a radical transformation, that is by opening up to insights generated by the tradition of Japanese thought, especially by the so-called Kyoto school commencing with Nishida Kitarō.¹ This assumption reflects a diagnosis, which is widely shared in

¹ Cf. *inter alia* Davis et al. (eds.), *Japanese and Continental Philosophy: Conversations with the Kyoto School*; Berque, *Milieu et identité humaine. Notes pour un dépassement de la*

recent trends in cultural studies and modernity discourse. As early as in 1995, Mike Featherstone noted, “the end of Western modernity is in sight, the West has ‘peaked’ with an accompanying sense of exhaustion”. And he goes on:

“But there is no sense of exhaustion in East Asia and other parts of the world which are pursuing their own national and civilizational blend of modernity. Hence it may be more propitious to speak of modernities rather than of modernity”.²

Featherstone appears to be one of the earliest proponents of “multiple modernities”, a concept that has come to the fore at the beginning of the new millennium³ and which since then has sparked a lively debate in social sciences and cultural studies.⁴ This has led to the somewhat inflationary coinage of new terms like “entangled modernities”, “alternative modernities”, “hybrid modernities”, and so forth.

For some of those embracing Zen and Kyoto school philosophy, in Western philosophy, that “sense of exhaustion” materializes in the stubborn, yet ultimately fruitless insistence on defining the very subject matter of philosophy, its concepts, methods, language, and its overall logic of discourse. (And, of course, this vein of criticism has a history that also goes back to Nietzsche, Heidegger and those post-structuralist authors following their dissatisfactions with Western modernity. I will come back to these connections later.) This, too, mirrors a discourse that has come to the fore in the social sciences several years earlier. There,

“the problem of modernity is increasingly discussed on a meta-level [...] Therefore, the accent shifts from determining the essence of modernity to an inquiry into narrations of modernity, and there are emerging struggles about the interpretation of the concept of modernity”.⁵

modernité. This line of research originates in, and further develops, insights generated since the late 1980’s. Precisely because this line of research has shaped the image of Japanese philosophy in the West in a one-sided problematic way, it has been vigorously attacked by Steineck et al., *Begriff und Bild der japanischen Philosophie*. See also Paul, *Philosophie in Japan. Von den Anfängen bis zur Heian-Zeit. Eine kritische Untersuchung*. For an overview of what is involved here, cf. Liederbach, “Philosophie im gegenwärtigen Japan: eine Problemskizze”.

² Featherstone, *Undoing Culture*, 83–84.

³ Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*.

⁴ Cf. the lucid discussion in: Schwinn, “Gibt es eine multiple Moderne?”.

⁵ Willems et al., *Moderne und Religion*, 13 (my translation).

Similarly, in the field of Japanese philosophy, we observe a shift from day-to-day-business, that is the interpretation of texts, their translation and historical and systematic treatment to a discussion on a meta-level, where struggles about the interpretation of the very concept of philosophy are taking place.⁶

The motivation for these struggles is aptly characterized by Rolf Elberfeld, who writes:

“Today, at the beginning of the 21st Century, another fundamental turn in the history of philosophy is taking place. It is not clear yet what it means that Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, and other languages have become the medium of *current philosophy*”.⁷

⁶ An anecdote might illustrate what is at stake here. In his talk at a recent conference on Japanese philosophy in Hildesheim, Raji Steineck (University of Zurich) made the perfectly reasonable proposal to be cautious when assigning the label “philosophical” to texts in the Japanese tradition which were obviously not meant to be philosophical texts at all. The text in question was Dōgen’s *Uji* (Being-Time), which since the days of Tanabe Hajime has been used to foster a specific philosophical agenda, that is to develop an ontological alternative to, speaking with Heidegger, the Western metaphysics of presence. While rhetorical and lexical analysis of *Uji* as well as its historical background evince that this text was not meant to develop a philosophical argument on being, time, and their relation, but rather to strengthen the faith of Dōgen’s disciples at Eihei-ji temple in the teachings of the Buddha, the discussion following Steineck’s talk quickly turned into a debate on the nature of philosophy itself. Who has the authority, it was asked, to distinguish philosophical from non-philosophical texts? In an impatient rejoinder, Rein Raud (University of Tallinn), who was the main addressee of Steineck’s proposal, asserted the inevitability for Western philosophy to follow the example of other disciplines like art-history and literary studies, which in the course of the last five or so decades have come to recognize the fact that the achievements of formerly marginalized non-Western cultures are in principal of equal value in comparison to their Western counterparts. With respect to philosophy, this amounts to the following claim: Since a text needs not to be intentionally philosophical and has not to follow a specific argumentative style to be philosophically significant (a point, Steineck would, under certain conditions, agree with), we have to expand the corpus of so-called philosophical texts significantly, which would eventually lead to a transformation of philosophy itself (here, I suppose, Steineck would hesitate to agree, and rightly so). The ultimate claim is that Western philosophy no longer has the authority for defining its very subject matter. But, then, who has?

⁷ Elberfeld, *Philosophieren in einer globalisierten Welt*, 132 (my translation).

This observation, which mirrors insights generated by postcolonial discourse in cultural and social studies and aims at recognizing marginalized traditions, is accompanied by the following claim: “Precisely by questioning (*Hinterfragen*) the fundamental principles of the great philosophies since the early-modern age, there can be opened up virulent possibilities of critique”.⁸

This point is well made. However, I argue to decouple it from those sweeping claims about the historical fate of Western modernity we so often encounter in the relevant research literature. While it remains worthwhile to contemplate the significance of Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s dissatisfactions for rethinking the modern project—mainly the notions of cognitive and practical self-determination, arguably the two most prominent of its aspirations—one should be careful not to throw away the baby with the bathwater.

From the very beginning of modern Japanese philosophy, that is, since Nishida’s *Inquiry into the Good* (1911), these notions, mediated by the reception of German Idealism, have attracted considerable attention; one cannot even begin to form a comprehensive view on Kyoto school philosophy without taking into account the massive impact of Kant, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel during its formative stage. While the critical appropriation of German Idealism by Kyoto school philosophers could provide what John Maraldo has called “a lens on Greco-European thought”,⁹ the importance of this hermeneutical project for a reassessment of philosophical modernism is not yet sufficiently appreciated.¹⁰ The trenchant critique of the ontological and ethical foundations of modern subjectivity and autonomy we find in Nishida and Tanabe as well as in Kuki and Watsuji deserve creative adaptation in order to open a conversation on their significance for the philosophical discourse of modernity. We are not done with German Idealism’s take on the core issues of

⁸ *Ibid.*, 162 (my translation). While I agree with Elberfeld that there is something to be learnt from philosophical achievements of so-called marginalized cultures, I doubt that Nishitani Keiji’s criticism of Cartesianism, which he refers to in this context, is a good example. (Elberfeld refers to the German translation of Nishitani’s 『宗教とは何か』, *Was ist Religion*, 55 sqq.) For one thing, it can be doubted whether one is doing justice to Descartes when contrasting his methodological doubt with the religious-existential doubt in Zen. For another, and more importantly, Nishitani’s claim is resting on assumptions deriving from Heidegger’s critique of philosophical modernism, which in itself is anything but convincing, since it espouses an overgeneralized, monolithic view of the history of Western philosophy. I will expand on this point in the next section of my paper.

⁹ Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy in the Making I*, 21.

¹⁰ A notable exception is: Mine, “Zu den Möglichkeiten der ‘Logik des Ortes’ in Nishidas Philosophie am Leitfaden seiner Kant-Kritik”.

philosophical modernism as we are not done with their critical appropriations in Japan. In recent research, however, these critical appropriations appear to be taken for granted; far from being seized as an opportunity for questioning, refining and further developing these insights, they are forming the mere contingent background for attempts to do away with the modern project in general. For many of these attempts applies what Robert Pippin has aptly stated with respect to post-structuralist discourse on this plane, namely that

“in many such older and newer debates the way objections are posed, positions characterized, narratives narrated and so forth involve what are by now a large number of conventional readings and very settled, accepted histories, and these are almost all inaccurate and misleading about the original modern options. There are straw men, vague shadows, distorted portraits, and potted narrations everywhere in such debates”.¹¹

Many of the recent claims on the significance of Japanese philosophy are based on such standard views on the modern project. That is, we find lots of what Terry Pinkard, with respect to Hegel scholarship in the Western tradition, has denounced as “lazy interpretations”.¹² A brief glance at two treatments of Hegel’s philosophy of history in current research on Japanese philosophy will corroborate this point.

Hegel is taken to be “in many ways the godfather of Eurocentrism”, whose “grand narrative of the self-alienation and self-recovery of Spirit provides a most cunning justification for a Eurocentric teleological account of world history”;¹³ Hegel, we are told, who championed “a single ‘world history’ which derives from a principle of uniformity” has to be abandoned towards “a history of ‘worldly worlds’ which in itself is structured polycentrically” as proposed by Nishida.¹⁴ These standard views on Hegel’s philosophy of history can be seriously challenged. All depends on how “self-alienation and self-recovery of spirit” is to be understood. As a more careful reading reveals, taking into account Hegel’s conception of “infinite ends” makes the accusation of a historical teleology based on a principle of uniformity in Hegel look much less convincing.¹⁵ Such a reading would also open

¹¹ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, xiii.

¹² Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense?*, 2.

¹³ Davis, “Dialogue and Appropriation”, 43.

¹⁴ Elberfeld, *Kitarô Nishida*, 213 (my translation).

¹⁵ Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense?*, 39–49.

up possibilities to properly contextualize Hegel's philosophy of history within his project of a practical philosophy, which is indispensable for assessing his take on the problem of philosophical modernism. Although it remains questionable whether the dimension of Eurocentrism really is "less pernicious than is commonly assumed",¹⁶ the point that, according to Hegel, each culture is "an end in itself and calls for its own transcendence (including Europe)"¹⁷ is well made; it opens the possibility for acknowledging different path dependent realizations of cognitive and practical autonomy. Ultimately, the question is not so much what Hegel got wrong about non-Western cultures, deplorable as this may be, but rather what his flawed account reveals

"about the problems inherent in any collective enterprise that either takes something like the 'moral' to be equivalent to 'actually existing social rules' or which takes its own collective project to be simply unintelligible and thus available only the mystical".¹⁸

In the final section of this paper, I will make some suggestions on how such a nuanced interpretation of Hegel's claim about "infinite ends" could contribute to contextualizing the Kyoto school within the discourse of philosophical modernism.

So, my concern with the demands for critically interrogating the modern project is not that this is meant to pose a challenge to Western philosophy; it is rather their theoretical presuppositions, particularly the rather complex historico-philosophical conception underlying such interrogations I am concerned with. This is not only about hermeneutical accuracy; more importantly, relying on Heidegger's narrative forces one to choose between two seemingly straightforward alternatives—buying into the *singulare tantum* notion of modernity, or doing away with the notion of modernity for good—and, thus, forecloses the possibility of taking on board the concept of multiple modernities, which, as I believe, would open up new and, as I hope, fruitful perspectives on Kyoto School philosophy.

In the following, I will sketch out Heidegger's narrative of Western metaphysics, provide a critical discussion of its appropriation in Japanese philosophy (section 2), and offer an alternative view on the possible significance of the Kyoto school within the philosophical discourse of modernity (section 3).

¹⁶ Buchwalter, "Is Hegel's Philosophy of History Eurocentric?", 252.

¹⁷ Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense?*, 198.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 67.

2

The overgeneralized, monolithic view of Western philosophy noted above reflects a motive introduced by Martin Heidegger, which has become influential in recent research on Japanese philosophy. Heidegger had, as it is well known, accused the whole of the Western tradition of philosophy to suffer from what he called “forgetfulness of Being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*). For Heidegger, there is an almost necessary connection between philosophy’s quest for beings (not for Being itself) since the days of Plato, medieval theology, conceptions of mental representation in early modern philosophy, Kant’s transcendental turn, nineteenth century materialism, nihilism, and the technology driven late modern age—all of these epochs representing distinct stages in a process of increasing forgetfulness of Being. From this angle, the differences between determinate positions within this process become secondary issues. While Heidegger concedes differences in the intensity of forgetfulness of being, his verdict on the metaphysical tradition as a whole cannot be mistaken: Metaphysics is only the “prelude”¹⁹ for what he calls “the other beginning”. That is to say, within the “history of being” (*Seinsgeschichte*), Western metaphysics represents the time-span between the “first beginning” (*erster Anfang*) in Ancient Greek thought and the “other beginning” (*anderer Anfang*) that still has to come. What commences with the other beginning is no longer the matter of philosophy but rather that of an entirely new mode of thought, which Heidegger simply calls “thinking” (*Denken*). This “thinking”, we are told, is to be articulated not by philosophers, but by poets like Hölderlin and Trakl.²⁰

It is not difficult to see how such views on the philosophical tradition of the West have been taken up by Heidegger’s disciples in Kyoto, most notably by Nishitani Keiji, who, during a sojourn in Freiburg studied with Heidegger and attended the famous Nietzsche-lectures, Heidegger held from 1937 to 1939. My point is not so much that these views might have fueled the critique of modernity,

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 174: “. . . was sich in der Geschichte der Metaphysik ereignet hat: das Vorspiel des Er-eignisses selbst als der Wesung des Seyns”.

²⁰ For Heidegger’s notion of “history of being” cf. Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, 167-224. See also the lucid discussion by Günter Figal who eloquently argues for a nuanced interpretation of this notion as well as of Heidegger’s general stance towards metaphysics, and who concludes that, “for Heidegger, there is no ‘post-metaphysical’ thinking”. (Figal, “Verwindung der Metaphysik”, 459; my translation.)

Nishitani expressed in that infamous colloquium on “Overcoming Modernity”,²¹ although this critique informs much of Nishitani’s later views on modern Western culture and thought. More important in this context is that Nishitani’s treatment of philosophical modernism functions as a link which connects Heidegger with Ueda and his disciples in Japan and abroad. Nishitani sets the scene when, in a sweeping account, he narrates the history of modern Western thought in terms of nihilism, and when he hints at the possibility of overcoming nihilism by means of a “fundamental and sudden change” (*tenkan*), the reason for which cannot be accounted for, since “there is no reason that can be thought of, and a ground that should be cannot be thought of”.²²

These claims are echoed by Nishitani’s disciple, Ueda Shizuteru. Ueda holds that “European philosophy must be deconstructed and perhaps even pass through what Heidegger calls the end of philosophy to another beginning from which it can undergo a transformative turn to world philosophy”.²³ Only then, philosophy can live up to its task. “What is needed today is a world brought together by the fruits of mutual critique and mutual supplementation between different traditions”,²⁴ since, as Ueda hopes,

“[c]ontact between different traditions promises to help shed light on shared fundamental structures of human existence, and it will encourage new ways

²¹ 西谷『「近代の超克」私論』.

²² 西谷『宗教とは何か』, 254. 「このやうなニヒリズムの極限に至って初めて、そこに大きな根本的転換が生起する。[...] 我々はそれについて何故と問ふことは出来ない。それには考へ得られるべき理由はあり得ず、またあり得べき根拠は考えられない。」

²³ Ueda, “Contribution to Dialogue with the Kyoto School”, 21. Here, a qualification is necessary. Neither Heidegger, nor Nishitani and Ueda wish to proclaim the beginning of a new historical epoch. Rather, the fundamental and sudden change Nishitani mentions (or Heidegger’s *Ereignis*), is to hint at the possibility of a radically different mode of comportment that eventually will bring about a change in our relatedness to the world, beings, and others—all of this taking place *within* the situation of modern technology and nihilism, not in an imagined time *after* modernity. Nevertheless, these suggestions are ‘post-metaphysical’, in that they aim at suspending the modern regime of thought in favor of a new, *gelassen* mode of thinking. Here, the problem of dogmatism emerges, since it is unclear how one is to rationally justify these ‘groundless’ transformations. I come back to this in a minute. (For the ethical implications of this problem cf. Nishitani, *The I-Thou Relation in Zen-Buddhism*. See also Liederbach, *Between the Ontological and the Ontic: Nishitani Keiji and the Problem of Encounter*.)

²⁴ Ueda, “Contribution to Dialogue with the Kyoto School”, 22.

of bringing to awareness the understandings of the world and the self found in our various manners of being-in-the-world”.²⁵

While I deeply sympathize with this claim, I do not share the underlying assumption for engaging in this project, as long as this means to set up straw men, to draw distorted pictures and to narrate potted narratives, and, ultimately, to throw away the baby with the bathwater. I am also skeptical whether what we need in order to engage in this project is to “give birth to new world-philosophical principles”.²⁶ Finally, I am not so sure whether the hermeneutical situation which calls for what Heidegger once had called “the unavoidable conversation with the East-Asian world”,²⁷ is grasped correctly when subsumed under the heading of “nihilism”. How is it to be understood that Nietzsche “has helped to expose the roots of modern Western—and increasingly, global—nihilism”,²⁸ and what does it tell us about our current situation?

Indeed, the historically unprecedented situation of late modern, technology driven mass consumer societies requires philosophical explanation; the shift of norms, the loss of meaning, the atomization of societies, and the breaking up of family life—all those dissatisfactions with modernity addressed by its critics since Rousseau are, in fact, linked to the emergence of new modes of self-understanding and, at the same time, of new scientific, aesthetic, and moral ways of coping with the world, which first came to the fore in early modern European thought. To be sure, philosophy has to account for that. However, vacuuming up these very different problems into the one notion of “nihilism” can neither give credit to their complexity, nor can it account for the, again, complex set of conditions that lead to the emergence of Western modernity in the first place. Here, a fine-grained account is called for, more in the line of Charles Taylor’s work²⁹ than in the line of Heidegger and his followers. On the basis of such a fine-grained account, the assertion that there could (and, in fact, had to) be an ending of modernity becomes implausible. The point in question is, whether there is a way out of this “dialectics of enlightenment” (Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s phrase) or, which amounts to the same, whether the narration of modernity reaches its climax not at some end but on its way.

²⁵ Ibid., 20.

²⁶ Ibid., 30.

²⁷ Heidegger, *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 43: “das unausweichliche Gespräch mit der ostasiatischen Welt” (my translation).

²⁸ Davis, “Nishitani after Nietzsche”, 96.

²⁹ Cf. *inter alia*: Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

As Robert Pippin has convincingly shown, the dissatisfactions with modernity can never be soothed: “thinking of it as prompting a resolution is already a misreading of modernity’s perpetual dissatisfactions”.³⁰ It could be argued that the criticism that attended the modern project since its inauguration, reveals an inherent ambiguity in modernity itself, which is famously rendered in Hegel’s reading of Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, to whom he attributes the “speech of this disorientation, which is so clear to itself”.³¹ Hegel wants to suggest here that the very rationality that drives the “cultural formation” (*Bildung*, a notion, which, in those days, had a determinate positive ring) of the modern epoch, gives rise to the most subtle forms of “alienation”,³² for which there is no ultimate cure, since the understanding at work here establishes a second reality of semblance (*Schein*) which is difficult to see through. Hence, Pippin’s conclusive prognosis is: “unending modernity”.³³ If it is true that after Kant’s transcendental turn, the various anti-modern appeals, be they traditionalist, religious, historicist or whatever, “look less like discoveries or realizations, and more like how we come, at some moment in time, to construe ourselves or the cosmos”,³⁴ that is, if it is true that the articulations of the dissatisfactions with modernity give evidence to “the unavoidable role of a spontaneous self-determination even in self-limiting and self-effacing activities”,³⁵ then Nishitani’s claim that the “fundamental and sudden change” cannot be accounted for by reason, loses much of its credibility. Putting our hopes in an “other beginning” after the end of modernity

“would not only return us to an an-archic or unprincipled world of differences, plurality, and heteronomy celebrated in some postmodern thought, but also a world of conflict, war rather than play, and those who profess to ‘speak’ for what cannot be ‘said’ (a role as problematic as it is in those who speak for ‘what our community believes’, ‘who we are’, what ‘problems’ we need to work on, as well as for spokesmen for the ontological happening.)”³⁶

³⁰ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 178.

³¹ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 304. Cf. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 387: “Rede dieser sich selbst klaren Verwirrung”.

³² Cf. Bubner, “Rousseau, Hegel und die Dialektik der Aufklärung”.

³³ Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, 160.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

Ultimately, in the “other beginning”, we would find ourselves in a situation similar to that one which had called for Kant’s transcendental turn in the first place.

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How, then, could the project of a “mutual critique and mutual supplementation between different traditions” be pursued? What would be its purpose?

Since I cannot possibly treat this project here in even a remotely satisfying way, I will restrict myself to putting forward a set of undefended (but, as I think, defensible) theses on the underlying assumptions of this project.

- (i) The philosophically significant part of the multiple modernity thesis depends on the acknowledgement of culture-specific “moral orders”.³⁷ The encounter with Western modernity has forced non-Western societies to rework their traditional moral orders and fuse them with modern Western ideas. Strictly speaking, multiple modernities are culturally inflected variations of Western modernity. Hence, a cross-cultural dialogue becomes possible. (Put differently, the moral orders entertained in multiple modernities are neither to be mistaken for a plurality of mutually exclusive conceptual schemes, nor are they mere repetitions of Western modernity.)
- (ii) Moral orders are best understood in a Hegelian fashion as path dependent “shapes of spirit”, or “forms of life”. Human subjects entertain and sustain their social space of reasons, and thus aim at fulfilling their desire for a reconciled world. Hence, the reasons, human subjects act on, are to be conceived of as achievements, as results of joint commitments. The path dependency of how these spaces of reasons are entertained and sustained accounts for the differences between them.
- (iii) Among the ideas appropriated by non-Western modernizing societies, the idea of freedom as self-determination stands out, for it is the core-idea of Western modernity and the most difficult one to fuse with traditional ideas.
- (iv) There is a logic of how the idea of self-determination is realized in each culture, but there is no logic that would encompass these multiple logics. Hegel’s account of world-history, although it allows for accommodating the idea of

³⁷ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 3–22.

culture-specific logics of realizing the idea of self-determination, had to fail because it was meant to develop such an all-encompassing logic.³⁸

Obviously, before engaging in (i) to (iv), a good deal of preparatory work needs to be done, mainly, as proposed above, to initiate a conversation between philosophical modernisms, in particular German Idealism and the Kyoto school. John Maraldo has put forward a useful maxim to be employed for this kind of work: “Instead of assuming that Nishida and ‘Kyoto School’ thinkers mean something fundamentally different than ‘Western’ philosophers”, he says, “it would be more fruitful to consider them together and investigate their notions [...] in detail”.³⁹ In the following, I wish to develop some rough ideas of what shape these preparatory work could take when following Maraldo’s maxim.

To begin with, once one shook off the fetters of the mono-thematic narrative of “modern Western—and increasingly, global—nihilism”, one is free to acknowledge the modern condition as it really is. Western modernity has gone global and has forced non-Western cultures into processes of modernization, which, on a deeper level, are, as it has turned out, anything but homogeneous.⁴⁰ “Multiple modernities” is a reality that is emerging on the horizon of the beginning of the 21st Century. Hence, as a concept, it ought to be integrated into the philosophical discourse of modernity.⁴¹ Therefore, acknowledging the empirical fact that non-Western modernizing societies strive for the appropriation and realization of the core ideas of Western modernity: freedom, equality, and justice,⁴² does not entail an assertion of a hegemonic Western modernism.⁴³ However, it does entail the acknowledgement that each of these societies pursues its determinate way of realizing these ideas. That is to say, the discourse of modernity itself has to be pluralized. Once we have acknowledged the reality of multiple modernities, it no longer makes sense to pit various forms of religious, traditionalist, anti-modernist thought against an imagined hegemonic Western philosophical modernism. If it is true that any attempt at “overcoming modernity” means nothing else than

³⁸ I am following Pinkard’s conclusion; cf. Pinkard, *Does History Make Sense?*, 140–168.

³⁹ John C. Maraldo, *Japanese Philosophy in the Making I*, 116–117.

⁴⁰ Cf. Befe, “Globalization theory from the Bottom Up: Japan’s Contribution”.

⁴¹ Charles Taylor makes this point in: Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*.

⁴² Cf. Welzel, *Freedom Rising*.

⁴³ As a closer look on Western modernity reveals, culturally distinct, path dependent trajectories of appropriation and ramification of modern ideas in different societies have led to a plurality of modernities even within the West; with respect to the idea of equality cf. Rosanvallon, *The Society of Equals*.

introducing some kind of dogmatism that would make the reemergence of transcendental reflection inevitable, the various readings of Kyoto School philosophy as ushering in an “other beginning” become futile. Putting to rest such readings, means to free oneself for engaging Kyoto School philosophy as contributor to the modern project, not as its undertaker. That is, it would enable us to acknowledge the path dependent, culturally inflected shape, Kyoto School philosophy has given to philosophical modernism. Here, I believe, lies the significance of Ueda’s call for “mutual critique and supplementation of different traditions”.

While, in philosophy, examples for such an enterprise are rarely found (the case of Leibniz notwithstanding), the situation is different in the realm of arts and in other areas. Consider how Van Gogh was inspired by traditional Japanese painting, how Debussy adopted principles of composing techniques in Gamelan music, and how Andō Tadao’s concrete buildings—which are in themselves examples for mutual critique and supplementation⁴⁴—are appropriated in Western architecture. Or take the example of civic engagement: Gandhi introduced the practice of non-violent protest to the West and, thus, reminded political activists in Europe and the United States of their Christian roots. These are just a few, particularly well-known examples for the intricate relationships between multiple modernities.

For philosophy, similar cases are still to be made. The question to be asked is this: What have Kyoto School philosophers to contribute to the discourse of philosophical modernism? That is, how can they help us in enhancing our understanding not only of the *aporiai* of the modern project, but also of its aspirations?

As proposed above, revisiting Kyoto School philosophers’ engagement with German Idealism might help us to answer such questions. Kant and Hegel scholarship has made tremendous progress in the last couple of decades, the results of which form a stark contrast to the conclusions, Kyoto School philosophers arrived at. While in the days of Nishida et al., much of the discussion on idealism was informed by Neo-Kantianism,⁴⁵ the situation is very different today. What could have hardly been expected a century ago, namely that, for instance, Nishida’s notion of “enactive intuition” (行為的直観) arguably shows similarities with Hegel’s

⁴⁴ Cf. Figal, *Ando. Architektur Raum Moderne*.

⁴⁵ Cf. 板橋『西田哲学の論理と方法：徹底的批評主義とは何か』.

conception of minded agency,⁴⁶ should be no longer surprising today. Hence, the contributions Nishida could make to current debates on, say, the role of conceptual activity in our everyday-coping with the world,⁴⁷ merit attention. A similar case can be made for Watsuji's reading of Hegel. Watsuji's understanding of *Geist* (spirit) is hardly in sync with recent efforts to come to grips with this notion. Therefore, it is fascinating to see how the interpretations by Pinkard, Pippin, and Larmore are overlapping with conclusions, Watsuji drew from his (albeit outdated) critique of Hegel.⁴⁸ Furthermore, reassessing Watsuji's encounter with Hegel opens the possibility for situating his ethical thought within the context of debates on ethical universalism vs. particularism and other problems in practical philosophy.⁴⁹

Since Nishida et al. could not but discuss problems like consciousness, the autonomous self, the relation between receptivity and spontaneity, and others against the backdrop of their specific hermeneutical situation, what they came up with were culturally inflected accounts of these 'modern' issues. Therefore, when Nishida's philosophy of nothingness is associated with Zen-Buddhism, or Watsuji's ethical thought with Confucianism and primitive Buddhism, this indicates that their findings are as contingently path dependent as are the modern historical developments they attend. Hence, they are to be considered as contributions to inquiries into problems central to philosophical modernism, not as its overcoming. (Again, this is neither to suggest the homogenization of thought, nor does it mean that pre-modern thought of any given culture is philosophically irrelevant or, even worse, unintelligible. It does mean, however, that there are decisive differences in what each culture allows itself to understand, which, in turn, is reflected in the plurality of trajectories of the modernization of thought.)

Giving a voice to Kyoto School philosophers does not suggest that one should expect them to offer ultimate answers or final solutions for problems like those mentioned above. It does mean, however, that they can open up new perspectives on them; acknowledging different perspectives on the core notions of

⁴⁶ Cf., for instance, Hegel's treatment of a skilled person's agency in § 66 of the *Encyclopedia Logic* (Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften I*, 156–157) and Nishida's accounts of "acts of artistic production" (芸術的創造作用) and "embodied comprehension" (身体的に把握すること) in 『直接に与えられたもの』, 50–51 and 『行為的直観』, 309 respectively.

⁴⁷ Cf. Schear (ed.), *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World*.

⁴⁸ Cf. Liederbach, "Watsuji's Reading of Hegel".

⁴⁹ Sevilla, *Watsuji Tetsurō's Global Ethics of Emptiness: A Contemporary Look at a Modern Japanese Philosopher*, has argued that in Watsuji, we can find building blocks for an ethics that lives up to our present situation.

the modern project would help us to grasp these notions in a more comprehensive way. Lucy Schultz's observation that,

“With the Kyoto scholars as Hegel's conversation partners, the nature of dialectic and the movement of spirit in self-consciousness becomes clearer than it could have been had it been treated exclusively within the European and American context”,⁵⁰

applies also to the problem discussed here. That is, a multi-perspective approach will contribute to our understanding of philosophical modernism as a whole in that it challenges well established narratives and deep-seated philosophical beliefs by providing a Japanese “lens on Greco-European thought” (to make use of John Maraldo's pithy phrase again).

I have argued that a good deal of the program sketched out above would have to be carried out by referring to the conceptual resources we find in Hegel's philosophy, even though it might lead to relativizing, at least to some extent, the very concept of Western modernity, which Hegel in his narrative so passionately defended. This will certainly not turn out to be a straightforward story like the one being told in Meßkirch and Kyoto; instead we will have to deal with the messy intricacies involved in the reception and ramification of modern ideas in Japan. Might it not, after all, be the case not that Western philosophy has reached an impasse, but rather that there is a “a sense of exhaustion” in engaging with this philosophy on the side of those who propose a “transition” from philosophy to — where?

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⁵⁰ Schultz, “Review of Peter Suares, *The Kyoto School's Takeover of Hegel*”, 224.

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