

# Toward a Redefinition of Japanese Philosophy<sup>1</sup>

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***Abstract:** This paper reconsiders the implications of “Japanese philosophy”. Works of Nishida Kitaro and the Kyoto school are often considered the most prominent in Japanese philosophy. However, this image is misleading of the efforts of most Japanese philosophers of the last 150 years. In fact, the philosophical style of Nishida and his followers is uncommon, and the majority of Japanese thinkers adopt different approaches to the discipline of philosophy. It is thus appropriate to imbue the term Japanese philosophy with a more expansive meaning that includes the practices of Japanese philosophers other than Nishida and the Kyoto school.*

*The first section of this paper interprets Nishida and the Kyoto school as embodiments of a Japanese version of philosophical modernism. Two different models presented by Robert Pippin and Peter Osborne are discussed to better understand this term. According to both the models, Nishida’s Zen no Kenkyu incorporates distinctive features of philosophical modernism. This suggests that it is not entirely necessary to consider Nishida and the Kyoto school as the exclusive paradigm of Japanese philosophy. The second section presents two broad forms or methodologies adopted by most Japanese scholars: interpretation of classical texts and critical thinking. Although are not generally mentioned as representative of Japanese philosophy, both have historical roots in pre-modern Japanese traditions. In particular, the interpretation of classical texts had reached elevated levels of sophistication in the methodological sense by the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Ogyu Sorai and Motoori Norinaga are the two main contributors to this type of philosophical expression. In contrast, critical thinkers could find their precursor in Tominaga Nakamoto, a severe critic of Buddhist thoughts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The third section thus concludes that Japanese philosophy should include not only modernism but also interpretation of classics and critical thinking.*

## Introduction

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The Japanese word *tetsugaku* [philosophy] itself clearly implies that the intellectual activity it names originated in the Ancient Greek world and was developed mainly in Europe. Awareness of this historical fact led to the creation of the word *tetsugaku* at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a translation of *philosophy*, *Philosophie*, *philosophie* in major European languages. Thus, *tetsugaku* does not have a Japanese origin, but was imported and adopted from somewhere else.

The adoption of philosophy can be considered in the context of the formation of the modern Japanese nation state, begun in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. That is, philosophy in Japan began as a subject in the modern university system, a required educational institution for a modern nation state. This means that philosophy was not a result of an autonomous or inherent development of Japanese society and culture but was part of its reaction to the radical changes brought by the globalizing international circumstances of the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This has historically led philosophy in Japan to follow such leading countries as France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and the United States. People outside philosophy as well as philosophers themselves have repeatedly raised the question of whether there is a Japanese philosophy. This is the more poignant in that having an original philosophy is considered a quasi-requirement for membership in the group of developed countries.<sup>2</sup>

The Kyoto School, and Nishida Kitaro above all, is recognized as the most prominent representative of Japanese philosophy. Nishida's name functions as a sufficient response to those questioning Japanese philosophy. His originality consists in his assimilation of the Western tradition of philosophy into existing Japanese ways of thought, such as Zen Buddhism. Today, Nishida is still considered a proof of the existence of Japanese philosophy, although other names have been added to his, in recognition of their creation of an original and comprehensive system on the grounds of a fundamental principle.

However, most philosophical investigators, not only today but also through for the last 150 years, do not engage in producing anything like the philosophy of the Kyoto school. One explanation that is often given is that the majority simply lacks the talent to create a new philosophy that possesses originality, and only very few, exceptional philosophers achieve such heights. However, this explanation does not explain what Japanese philosophy has been doing instead. The majority has

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<sup>2</sup> I have argued that these features are common for countries in Latin America (Nakano 2017).

simply not worked in that direction at all. While they praise what the Kyoto school has produced, most consider its style not to be their own, and they have aimed at different goals. It would therefore be misleading to consider Nishida, the Kyoto school, and those who created an original and comprehensive system on the basis of a novel principle, as the sole representative of Japanese philosophy or the sole model for it to follow.

In this paper, (1) I show, that it is possible to interpret the Nishida-model of philosophy as a Japanese version of philosophical modernism. Additionally, I believe that modernism is one of three main streams in the history of modern Japanese philosophical development. (2) I tentatively call the other two “interpretation of classical texts” and “critical thinking”. These two streams of actual philosophical thinking, as will be developed in this paper, have their methodological roots in the pre-modern Edo era, at the latest in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Then, finally, (3) I propose imagining a map of Japanese philosophy constituted by these three streams (modernism, interpretation, and critical thinking). A consequence of this perspective is that integration of some forms of intellectual activities which are sometimes excluded from *tetsugaku* into the map is necessary.

## 1. Nishida as a Philosophical Modernist

Nishida and his successors in the Kyoto school were not satisfied with merely reading and understanding the texts of past philosophers. Rather, they set themselves the task of grasping an original fundamental principle to develop a novel, comprehensive philosophical system to compete with or even overmaster past philosophical systems, like those of Descartes, Kant, and Hegel etc. Nishida, in his *Zen no Kenkyu*, explains everything, including cognition, volition, reality, morality, and religion using the unique principle of pure experience. This orientation toward comprehensiveness and systematicity seems to be at odds from the general tendency of contemporary Japanese thinkers today. Instead, scholars appear to prefer more accurate specification and precise formulation of arguments to the grandeur and magnificence of a proposed cosmic vision.

I interpret Nishida and the Kyoto school as embodying a Japanese version of philosophical modernism; to interpret this term, I refer to two models: Pippin 1999 and Osborne 2010. Here, I do not judge which model is more accurate. Instead, I

consider how Nishida's *Zen no Kenkyu* bears distinctive features of modernism, in both assessments.

From Pippin's perspective, philosophical modernism works to complete what Kant began, by radicalizing it. This project is the quest for the autonomy and self-determination of human subject. Kant's successors, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger in particular, radicalized this principle to realize what Kant did not complete because of his "strict dualism between spontaneity and receptivity" (Pippin 1997, 11). Nishida intended to surpass this Kantian (or Cartesian) dualism between subject and object, adopting the principle of pure experience, which would be genuine self-determination. After the publication of his *Zen no Kenkyu*, Nishida develops a more radical principle self-consciousness, comparing this idea to Fichte's *Tathandlung* (1987, 22). Fichte's idea is in turn his radicalized version of Kant's transcendental apperception. Nishida intended to reach a deeper layer of self-consciousness than Kant appreciated. Nishida can thus be seen as a philosophical modernist, according to Pippin's formulation.

Osborne responded by criticizing Pippin for failing to distinguish modernism from modernity. This failure has its consequence in Pippin's idea that Kant was the first modernist in philosophy (Pippin 1999, 11; 45–50). According to Osborne, Kant, like Descartes, was a modern philosopher because he developed his thought as "a self-grounding new beginning" or a "break with the authority of a new historical beginning" (Osborne 2010, 395). He (nor Descartes) is not a modernist because he was committed to non-temporal universal rationality and did not affirm "ongoing production of philosophical novelty" (*ibid.*). Osborne pointed out that "the logic of self-transcendence dictates that it too transcends its own inaugural forms" (Osborne 2010, 396). In short, modernism affirms the production of novelty itself, creating a negation of the past to essentially renew the historical present. It is evident that Nishida can be characterized as a modernist in this sense too. He intended to overcome the horizon of the modern subject-object dualism through, first, the principle of pure experience, then self-consciousness, followed by nothingness. Each time he reached a deeper structure of our experience and consciousness, such that each new principle negated the previous one, a more radical point of view. This literally is the practice of an ongoing affirmation of novelty.

Therefore, we can consider Nishida and his followers to be the Japanese representatives of philosophical modernism. Nishida confronted the same problem as his contemporary European post-Kantian philosophers, and his achievement may have been qualitatively equivalent to that of any European philosopher from the

beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not only did he develop a comprehensive philosophical system on the ground of a fundamental principle, but he did it by assimilating a Japanese traditional worldview to a Western philosophical context. On this point as well, Nishida and his followers intended to add novelty to the philosophical conversation ongoing in the West. Nishida showed that Japanese culture could produce an original contribution to philosophy on a universal level.

It is not likely that Nishida and the Kyoto school are the only Japanese representatives of modernism in philosophy. As Osborne shows, modernism can be distinguished in its transcendental and its empirical senses (Osborne 2010, 393). Modernism in the transcendental sense denotes the ongoing affirmation of novelty and has an implied temporal structure; that is, it exhibits a future-oriented negation of the past through the present. By contrast, modernism in the empirical sense indicates multiple concrete, historically particular forms of modernist practice. Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Adorno, as well as perhaps Deleuze, Derrida, and others, were all philosophical modernists.<sup>3</sup> Nishida and the Kyoto school were Japanese philosophical modernists, but others have also existed, like Hiromatsu Wataru and Omori Shozo. The debate titled “Overcoming the Modern” also shows characteristics of the philosophical modernism described so far. There are different representatives of Japanese modernism in philosophy.

It is important to note that Japanese philosophy is not only modernist. Rather, over the past 150 years, most Japanese philosophers have been engaged in something different from the development of a novel comprehensive philosophical system, based on a fundamental principle. For several decades, many scholars expressed the perspective that such system construction is what philosophers should do. The implication has been that the majority did not do it because they could not, for lack of talent, but everyone should have intended to produce a philosophical system. However, now, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, few scholars are continuing to produce any sort of original system to explain everything. Although many scholars appreciate the achievements of the earlier Japanese philosophers mentioned here; they are intentionally engaged in a different type of intellectual activities.

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<sup>3</sup> Here I do not enter into the discussion whether the post-modern and post-modernism are essentially different from the modern and modernism or are simply a continuation of the latter.

## 2. Methodological Origins of the Two Main Streams of Japanese Philosophy

Today, Japanese scholars of *tetsugaku* can, very roughly speaking, be divided in two streams. There are those who study one portion or another of the history of Western philosophy, from the ancient Greeks up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They interpret what past philosophers wrote and reconstruct the history of philosophy. Another type of scholar tends to deny the philosophical significance of reading and understanding past philosophical texts as an activity in itself. They state instead that philosophy consists in the inquiry into problems, the formulation of questions, and the critical examination of different types of argument, instead of the endless analysis of texts written by others. I call tentatively the former group of scholars “interpreters of classical texts” and the latter “critical thinkers”.

Neither of these two types of scholar are usually called representatives of Japanese philosophy. This is strange because most Japanese scholars of philosophy are engaged in either of these two groups of activities. It is true, first, that their products are more specific than the products of modernism’s great system-builders, and therefore, they do not tend to attract the attention of most people. Second, interpretation and critical thinking do not appear to be something especially Japanese, and this may be why such activities are not recognized as representing the substantial content of Japanese philosophy. Nevertheless, I believe, these two streams maintain continuity with pre-modern forms of thinking from the Edo period. This continuity concerns methodology.<sup>4</sup> A recognition of the roots of the present may bring us to an understanding of the meaning of the present and to evaluate it in a different perspective.

### i. Interpretation of Classical Texts

Over the course 18<sup>th</sup> century, the methodology of the interpretation of classical texts reached a high pinnacle of sophistication, thanks to two great thinkers: Ogyu Sorai and Motoori Norinaga. The former rejected his contemporary mainstream thinking *shushi gaku*, which followed the doctrines of Zhu Xi, the influential Chinese neo-Confucian of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Sorai recommended, similarly to Ito Jinsai, reading the original classical text, such as *Liujing* or the *Analects*, directly. He denominated

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<sup>4</sup> In this article, I use the term “methodology” in a broad sense, which includes attitude toward a problem, manner of developing and expressing a thought.

this methodology *kobunji gaku*. He stressed the importance of confronting classical texts without the bias of prejudices formed in later times by other interpreters. Sorai's general policy on reading the classical texts can be deduced, even though it is not systematically expressed but only in fragments, from the *Tomonsho*, which collects his correspondence with his samurai pupil Mizuno Motoakira (Genrou). On his part, Norinaga rejected Confucianism in general and advocated a return to Japanese classical texts such as the *Tale of Genji*, one of the greatest Japanese novels, written by a noblewoman in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and *Kojiki*, a Japanese mythology edited in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In addition to changing his canonical texts from Chinese to Japanese, he also refined study methodologies for these classical works.<sup>5</sup> The *Uiyamabumi*, written in 1797, that is, immediately after he completed his masterpiece *Kojiki-den*, is a brief summary of his methodology of the classic studies.

Few scholars working in *tetsugaku* would now admit continuity with Sorai or Norinaga, even if only in methodology. For contemporary researchers, European hermeneutics represents a much more familiar perspective. However, university education in philosophy is frequently grounded in the form of the seminar where the teacher and students read philosophical texts line by line, with minute and careful attention. This concrete practice in daily seminars is not always justified with the use of hermeneutic theories, but it maintains a continuity with the practices of the anterior generations and is thus tied to pre-modern traditions.<sup>6</sup> Maeda noted that *kaidoku* [group reading] was established by the Jinsai and Sorai school (Maeda 2012, Chap.2). Supposedly, in the Meiji and Taisho eras, i.e., in the earlier period of adopting philosophy from abroad, the continuity was too obvious to discuss. Following that, at the beginning of the Showa era (1926), Muraoka Noritsugu showed that the philology of the German August Boeckh (1785–1867) had much in common with Norinaga's (1730–1801) methodology (Muraoka 2006, 15). In the following, I roughly and briefly give the main points of the methodologies of Sorai and Norinaga against the backdrop of the contemporary interpretation of classical texts in Japan.

First, reading canonical texts is an attempt to recognize universal truth from the past, called *michi* [way / path], that is valid also for the present (Sorai Zenshu, 472; Norinaga Zenshu, 9). Sorai expresses that *seijin* [the sacred ancients] know everything, from the past to the future; if this were not so, it would not be called

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<sup>5</sup> For the influence of Sorai to Norinaga and the methodological continuity between them, see: Maruyama 1952, 160–74; Yoshikawa 1975, 306.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion of the pre-modern tradition as a root of contemporary readings classical texts in seminars, see Maeda 2012.

*seijin* (Sorai Zenshu, 475). This is, of course, tautology: *seijin* know everything because they are *seijin*, that is, sacred men. No other ground is shown for the proposition that *seijin*'s thought, as expressed in the classics, is true. In other words, Sorai does not justify or argue for the validity of *seijin*'s thought. On the contrary, the starting point of any investigation is the assertion that *seijin* tells the truth. This is indeed a fundamental presupposition, without which no meaningful reading can begin. Norinaga, for his part, does not explain why the Japanese classics, rather than the Confucian ones, express the truth, but he only asserts it (Norinaga Zenshu, 9–11).

This attitude is often confused by the critical thinkers discussed below with irrational and feudalistic authoritarianism. This, however, is only an appearance. Sorai and Norinaga should be understood as practicing the methodologically Davidsonian principle of charity to draw something meaningful from the texts they are working on. Without supposing that the target text contains something that can be positively and rationally understandable, we cannot begin to interpret it sincerely. Sorai and Norinaga's assertion of the truth of the classical texts is a methodological presupposition for productive interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, both thinkers criticize scholars who judge texts hastily, using only their personal, limited perspective. According to Sorai, *seijin*'s truth (*michi*) is too large to capture by one person's limited point of view (Sorai Zenshu, 477). When we judge it, we frequently just determine a limited amount of content, using our prejudice, and consequently, we fail to comprehend what it is telling us. This is natural, because the content that is to learn from the text transcends or is outside of our actual perspective. Modern readers would say that this is not necessarily because what is old is superior and the products of the present are inferior but simply because the ancient perspective is different than ours. It is possible to interpret Sorai says as saying the same thing, only using pre-modern vocabularies.

We can understand Norinaga's criticism against *karagokoro* in the same way: *karagokoro* literally means Chinese spirit. While it is undeniable that Norinaga inclines toward xenophobia, his criticism is not a mere reflection of his personal stubbornness but instead relies on historical and social observations on the structure of Japanese way of studying. In this context, *karagokoro* does not in the first place have anything to do with nationality but rather indicates a sophistic attitude, which puts morally approved or politically correct reasoning before natural authentic

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<sup>7</sup> Obviously, there are many topics to discuss about the concept of "michi" in Sorai and Norinaga, which I cannot enter in this simplified description here. Concerning "michi" in Norinaga and its difference from Sorai, see Sagara 2011, Chap. 3.



passions and affections (Norinaga Zenshu, 47–8). That is, this criticism is directed at the widespread habit of Japanese scholars to underestimate the real way of being in the Husserlian lifeworld, on behalf of a theoretical worldview adopted from abroad, such as that of *shushi gaku*. Norinaga works to rehabilitate the Japanese form of the lifeworld by reading the Japanese classics without using the mediation of the Chinese theoretical value system. *Karagokoro* is, therefore, a projection of a valid theoretical view onto a text written a thousand years previously. It is the largest obstacle to learning something actually valid, beyond the transition of time.

In reading classical texts, to be sure, personal prejudices must be destroyed, as well as normal values and sometimes even the publicly approved worldviews of the present day. Confronting the text while keeping oneself open to other minds beyond one's personal understanding is crucial. Thinking critically as an independent subject sometimes disturbs that. We must methodologically suspend our own subjectivity and entrust it to the author of the text that we wish to understand, playing the role of a medium who transmits content from the past to colleagues in the present. Interpreters should not say "I think that ...", but "the Other thinks through me that ...". The subject of thinking is not set on the reader him- or herself but the author of the text. The text is merely a collection of material signs, and these signs do not literally think, and the only person who thinks is the reader. Nevertheless, as a matter of methodological attitude, the reader must not give a space to what he personally thinks but only to what the author thinks, independently of whether the reader likes it or not. This does not mean that the reader does not think at all. On the contrary, he or she must think a great deal, and even critically, but in a different sense from the independent subject. An interpreter of classical texts thinks critically but on behalf of the Other, that is, *seijin* or the ancient author of the canonical text. The reader behaves passively in relation to the text to comprehend it as something beyond his personal prejudice. When Sorai and Norinaga asserted that the truth of the text is without justification, they were recommending this type of methodological attitude.

Then, Sorai and Norinaga can be understood to have established a strict distinction between the primary text and the secondary literature. They were extremely critical and cautious with the interpretations of other scholars, while presupposing the truth of the primary text, without giving a justification. The secondary literature is not considered source of truth but at most as a reference to be consulted as we are struggling to access the truth. Therefore, for these two thinkers, to treat Zhu Xi's interpretation of the classical texts as source of the truth would be a

crucial methodological error. The scholar must, they thought, decisively confront the primary text and treat secondary literature as merely secondary, that is, only as tools that are used to access the original goal.

In their concrete manner of reading the texts, Sorai and Norinaga attained a highly refined insight. That is, their management of language shows an extraordinary strictness and systematic thoroughness. Sorai highlighted the importance of inferring the meaning of ancient writing from other texts in the same period, instead of relying on posterior commentaries (Sorai Zenshu, 469). He radicalized his policy to the extent that he renounced the common Japanese way of reading Chinese writings as though they were written in Japanese. Sorai worked to understand the Chinese classics, studying them directly in ancient Chinese, even without help of posterior Chinese commentaries. He criticized such posterior commentators as Zhu Xi for founding their understanding of ancient Chinese on their knowledge of modern Chinese. The meaning of each character and each word, he considered, should be understood only in its proper context.

Norinaga exhibits a similar perspective. His main difference from Sorai is limited to only the object of reading: he did not recognize the ancient Chinese canonical texts as classics worthy of study but only the Japanese classics. A strictness in comprehension of the language in situ and a tremendous effort to understand the texts as given were shared between Sorai and Norinaga. The ancient Japanese in *Kojiki* remained obscure for scholars preceding him. This is because, first, those scholars assigned a more prominent place to *Nihon Shoki*, another collection of Japanese mythology, because of its accordance with Chinese worldview, while almost entirely ignoring *Kojiki* which was written in Japanese and thus reflects the ancient Japanese worldview more directly. Second, to make matters worse, the Japanese of *Kojiki* was written with borrowed Chinese characters, as was inevitable due to the lack of a system of Japanese writing in 712, when *Kojiki* was compiled. Norinaga was almost the first scholar who managed to identify the pronunciation of this text, letter by letter, with few critical errors. This contribution was so great that scholars today still frequently cite his commentary.

Norinaga also stressed the importance of understanding each word in its context, instead of pursuing its meaning in isolation. He wrote that the meaning in use is much more relevant than the etymology of a word, although many scholars do pay close attention to the history of words (Norinaga Zenshu, 16). He clearly understood that words change their meanings in different contexts, meaning that they must be understood in relation to other words in the text or with reference to

other texts of the same period. His masterpiece, *Kojikiden*, a commentary on *Kojiki*, is full of references to other ancient texts, made to identify the way to pronounce and to understand each word in *Kojiki*.

Sorai and Norinaga did not believe that language was limited to expressing only clear awareness, distinct recognition, and conscious thinking; nor did they think that we can learn only theoretical knowledge that is not rooted in an unconscious, habitual way of being in the lifeworld. Sorai struggled to re-appropriate the total form of being that *seijin* teaches through reading the classics (Sorai Zenshu, 471–2). “Rei, gaku, kei, sei” [cousery, music, punishment, and government] are not theories or knowledge but rather bodily and habitual practices proper to different occasions. They are indispensable ethical grounds for knowledge, morality, and even national politics. The goal of reading the classics is not a theoretical knowledge but re-appropriation of the true ethical grounds at the time of *seijin*, which we access through language.

Norinaga explained the same process theoretically. He supposed an agreement among language, practice, and mentality both in each person and in each era of a region (Uiyamabumi, 17–8). Men and women have different manners of speaking, acting, and thinking. Moderate and stubborn people do show a similar difference. In the same way, the ancient people spoke, behaved, and felt in different way from the scholar’s contemporaries. In this way, Norinaga tried to grasp the totality and integrity of human beings, and setting these as an object of learning. The problem with this is that we only have texts that were constituted in language: we cannot touch the practices or minds of the ancient people or observe them directly. For this reason, linguistic strictness and accuracy are highly important, but the target of learning is not theoretical knowledge expressed through language, instead being the ancient form of being as a whole.

After all, however, the question may arise: what assurance do we have that we have reached of the truth of ancient people? How can we be confident that the ancient way is understandable or still valid today? Here, it should be noted that Sorai and Norinaga did not recommend that everything that is ancient should be applied to the present day. Sorai in *Gakusoku* noted that “therefore, if we understand well the ancient and have criteria, know the present and incorporate it, and distinguish and observe the difference and change of each era, then it will be easy to have a perfect insight into human habits and beings” (Sorai Zenshu, 76–7). He did not call for the application of ancient things to the present day without any consideration of differences in times. *Michi* must be obtained through the interpretation of the

canonical texts. The result of interpretation is not literally the same as ancient thought but rather is a kind of transformation, a creation of something that is valid and applicable even today.

Norinaga also appreciated the differences among periods and did not insist on applying directly every ancient thing to the present. Regarding Japanese poems, he accused those who insisted that writing should always be in the ancient style, without taking into consideration contemporary styles. According to him, these people did not distinguish between what does and what does not change with the times (Norinaga Zenshu, 21–5). Therefore, when he claimed to understand ancient things, he presupposed a difference between the ancient and the contemporary. His intention is to recognize what is valid and applicable beyond the transition of time through the interpretation of ancient texts, in a creative process.

Sorai and Norinaga's methods of interpreting the Classics were not primitive or pre-modern in the pejorative sense. On the contrary, they were equivalent to what is practiced and taught in university seminars in the present day. In other words, contemporary hermeneutic methodology was established more than 200 years ago, before modernization. During modernization, beginning 150 years ago, Japanese scholars added great works of the Western philosophy into their repertoire of texts worth reading. Thus, the change from the pre-modern to the modern period was in a sense not essential. Japanese interpreters have continued to pursue the same methodology through the last two or three centuries.

### **ii. Critical Thinking**

However, pre-modern Japanese scholars did not only interpret classical texts. There was quite a different group of scholars, whom I called “critical thinkers” above. They did not recognize the validity of transferring one's subjectivity to the author of the text but rather insisted on maintaining autonomous thinking. They expressed their own intellectual positions in the form “I think that ...” instead of “the Other thinks through me that ...”. Where interpretation begins with the assertion of the truth of the text, critical thinking does not accept such unjustified truth-postulation. Critical thinkers may discuss Buddhism, Confucianism, or Shintoism with references to ancient texts, but they do not refrain from criticizing such texts from an independent point of view. For them, only one horizon of truth exists, and the ancient and contemporary thought are compared there directly, using the same

criteria under equal qualifications for candidates of the truth. In contrast to the interpreters, they do not accept that there can be different forms of actualizing the truth in different periods and societies. There is, in this conception, only one universal stage for the truth.

Tominaga Nakamoto may be the most prominent thinker of this type. He criticizes those interpreters who directly apply the contents of past texts to the present (Tominaga 1966, 550–1). Instead, the social and historical context for past texts differed from ours, requiring special adjustment to one’s perspective. For this reason, it is difficult to apply the classics to the present. He does not consider it important to study the past itself, but to write, speak, eat, dress, and live in the present manner, to practice the good in conformity with the morality of the present (Tominaga 1966, 552–3). He does not entirely deny that studying classical texts can be significant, but his primary interest is clearly the present. Where the content of a text contradicts something in the present, he has no hesitation in discarding it.

His masterpiece, *Shutsujokougo*, published in 1745, is a detailed critical examination of Buddhist thought. Nakamoto’s knowledge of and insight into Buddhist teachings were so deep and rich that Norinaga, for example, took space in his *Tamakatsuma* to praise his work explicitly (Norinaga Zenshu, 244). His criticism is primarily directed to Buddhist scholars working on interpreting different classical texts to make them compatible and coherent with each other. Nakamoto held that such an approach does not provide good results: contradictions naturally remain among these texts because they were written by different authors in different circumstances in different eras. Here, he presented his *kajo* [addition] theory, according to which each thinker, despite borrowing the authority of the most ancient name, tries to add something new to the inherited teaching of the previous generations (Tominaga 1973, 43–8). Thus, a Buddhist classical text from a later period differs from earlier tradition because of its originality. Therefore, the teachings inevitably differ more and more from the originals. It is in vain to try to understand all classical texts and reconcile them. Nakamoto generalized his theory to Confucianism and Kokugaku, relativizing every canonical text as a divergence from previous tradition through the addition of its portion of originality (Tominaga 1966, 556–8).

Nakamoto’s achievements have been recognized by modern scholars. Nakamura Hajime considered Nakamoto greater than Sorai or Norinaga (Nakamura 1965, 202–5). He praised Nakamoto’s radical criticism, which directed at almost all the main streams of Oriental thought, including Kokugaku, Confucianism, and

Buddhism, by contrasting with Sorai and Norinaga, who did not apply their criticism to *michi*. Nakamoto was not committed to any specific thought or religion, while Sorai and Norinaga did accept certain types of thinking as authorities. Kato Shuichi interpreted Nakamoto's *kajo* theory as a radicalization of Sorai's methodology (Kato 1972, 19). Sorai too confronted the text with an objective, historical, and positivistic attitude, without putting forward his own moral point of view. However, according to Kato, Sorai was not radical enough and did not treat classical texts sufficiently objectively. Instead, he gave Confucian teachings an exceptional, transcendent status. Nakamoto, for his part, applied his *kajo* theory universally and uniformly without giving credit any particular ideology. I consider that Nakamura and Kato both misunderstood the methodology followed by Sorai and Norinaga as omitting a necessary degree of criticism, which I note above. In any case, it is important here that Nakamoto was prominent, critical, independent thinker of the pre-modern Japan.

### 3. Toward a Redefinition of Japanese Philosophy

Last, I reconsider the meaning of *tetsugaku*. Today, this word includes the interpretation of Western classical texts, Western-style critical thinking, and, of course, modernism; however, it tends to omit the interpretation of Oriental classical texts, that is, studies of Indian Buddhism and Chinese and Japanese thought. I claim that there should be a word to cover all these activities, to indicate that all of these are engaged in an essentially similar intellectual activity, against the same historical backdrop.

Some possible misunderstandings may appear. First, interpreters of Western texts may not appreciate their indebtedness to Japanese pre-modern scholars such as Sorai and Norinaga. Nevertheless, their work is continuous with theirs in term of methodology. Second, interpreters of Western texts may consider that those working with Oriental classical texts have nothing to do with them. However, they have intellectual interests in common not only with Western philosophers, but also with scholars of Oriental thought.

Third, where interpreters and critical thinkers are categorized as *tetsugakusha* [philosophers], the methodological gap tends to be omitted. In practice, the confusion of methodologies should be avoided because this erases the strengths of each type. There is no need for any scholar to be royal to only one methodology through his or her whole life; rather, one should distinguish between methodologies.

For interpreters, to treat a primary text critically would prevent them from being open to the Other; but for a critical thinker, there is no privileged primary text. To consider the secondary literature as a source of truth would place us in the same category as those who were criticized by Sorai and Norinaga. Interpretation and critical thinking are methodologically different manners of thought, represented by the perspectives “the Other thinks through me that ...” and “I think that ...”. There is no question here of which is superior. Each has its own proper strength, and there are always good interpreters and bad ones, just as with critical thinking. Lack of recognition of this methodological difference has often caused misunderstandings: it is as if, for example, reading a classical text was not in itself doing philosophy, postulating the truth of a text meant a lack of rationality, and there was nothing applicable to the present day in ancient texts.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, I conclude that in modern Japan, three types of philosophy have been predominant: interpretation of classical texts, critical thinking, and modernism. Among these three, the last is almost exclusively taken to represent Japanese philosophy. However, it would be more precise to interpret it instead as an exceptional and transient phenomenon in the history of the reception of philosophy in modern Japan. The fact that modernism is considered as the model for Japanese philosophy hinders philosophers from re-appropriating their proper roots and settling their future on the adequate soil. Beginning before modernization and continuing to the present, most scholars have been engaged either in interpretation or critical thinking. These two streams have always been in competition and have mutually improved each other through a not always friendly rivalry. We should recognize the entire field of these intellectual activities as Japanese philosophy.

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<sup>8</sup> These misunderstandings may be negative legacy of the modernism-oriented understanding of philosophy. It is important therefore to re-evaluate the philosophical productivity of interpretation of the classical texts especially in non-Western regions, not only Japan but also, for example, China. For example, Gardner (1998) describes it with regard to the history of Chinese Confucian commentaries. I appreciate the suggestion in this point provided by the anonymous referee of this article.

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