

EL DESARME CULTURAL DE LA FILOSOFÍA

JAMES W. HEISIG*

RESUMEN

Este artículo protesta contra la tesis que la filosofía es en sí misma universal, porque con frecuencia se remite de un modo ambiguo más a una universalidad entendida como dominación cultural que a una universalidad propiamente filosófica que incluya otros modos de lenguaje y pensamiento en el compromiso por una búsqueda universal de la verdad. Hace énfasis en que se necesita des-occidentalizar el foro filosófico, e ilustra cómo la escuela de Kyoto ha afrontado seriamente el desafío encarando, entre otros, los problemas del lenguaje, la complejidad de la traducción y los tradicionales límites occidentales entre filosofía y religión.

Palabras clave: Filosofía oriental, traducción, cultura, universalidad, filosofía occidental

* Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya, Japan. RECIBIDO:12.06.08
ACEPTADO:05.07.08

THE CULTURAL DISARMAMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

JAMES W. HEISIG*

ABSTRACT

This article protests against the claim that philosophy as such is universal, because it often ambiguously speaks more of a universality of cultural dominance than of a properly philosophical universality including other philosophical modes of language and thought in the commitment to a universal search for truth. It stresses the need of a deliberate decision to de-Westernizing the philosophical forum, and illustrates how the Kyoto School does seriously take up this challenge facing, among others, the heavy iron bars of language, translation intricacies, and Western traditional divide lines between philosophy and religion.

Key words: East Philosophy, translation, culture, universality, Western Philosophy

* Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture, Nagoya, Japan

PHILOSOPHY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY is poised to become philosophically universal for the first time. Although philosophers have aimed at such universality from its first beginnings, they have been bound for the most part, by cultural assumptions that have blocked the path before them. This is a rather bold statement to make for a legacy that reaches back over twenty-five centuries, but I know of no humbler way to express what seems to be taking place. The fact is, the philosophical tradition from the pre-Socratics to the present has suffered from a certain failure of coincidence with its own aims that have become too much of a problem to ignore any longer. The full story of how this internal contradiction became a habit of thought, and how challenges to it were systematically parried, may have to wait for the wisdom of hindsight. For now, it is enough to recognize that the cracks in the habit are too wide for it to hold together much longer.

The idea of philosophical universality, as we have come to know it, is a rather peculiar, logical mixture. To make this clear, first consider the following two propositions:

- (a) Language is universal.
- (b) English is a universal language.

On the face of it, both statements seem to be true enough, but the adjective *universal* has different logical functions in each of them. In the case of language as such, the term refers both to a synchronic historical fact that is at the same time a diachronic fact. That is to say, independent of culture, time, and economic and political conditions, there is not, nor has there ever been, a human society without language. But in the case of the English tongue, the claim is only synchronically, not diachronically, universal. Even if English should in fact become the second language of every human society on earth, this would still be conditioned by historical circumstances. It was not always so and there is no reason to assume it will remain so forever. Nor does it disallow the possibility of other equally universal languages. The idea of universality allows for enough ambiguity that it can be applied to the general notion of language and to the dominant tongue of the present without the two propositions contradicting each other.

Now consider two more propositions:

- (a) Philosophy is universal.
- (b) The Western philosophical tradition is a universal philosophy.

Logically, they are of the same types, but the contradiction is more problematic. The claim that philosophy as such is universal, implies that there is no society in which philosophy has nothing to say, just as there is no society that does not have a contribution to make to philosophy. To accept the claim is to orient thought towards the pursuit of truth wherever it is to be found; to dispute it is to forfeit that pursuit for bigotry. On the contrary, the statement that the particular philosophical tradition of the West, in all its variety of forms and throughout its long and illustrious history, constitutes a universal philosophy, is in the end a mere synchronic fact, not a diachronic one. There is no doubt that Western philosophy has been studied, and applied, across times and cultures, and in that sense it qualifies as *de facto* universal. But it is not universal in the same sense in which philosophy itself is. Its universality is that of a *historically dominant particular*. The fact that this dominance has lasted so long tends to blur the distinction between philosophy and Western philosophy, and thus to exclude the claim of other philosophical forms to universal relevance.

There is one important difference between philosophy and language, however. Whereas a particular language like English can absorb elements from other languages in the process of becoming dominant, it cannot open itself to the basic structures of other languages without losing its identity. There is no such thing as a “linguistic forum” in which different languages can communicate with each other through a shared grammar. Philosophy, on the other hand, is of its nature a forum for dialogue, and as such not only can extend itself across particular traditions but must do so. In other words, it is committed from the start to making the universality of historical dominance subservient to the universal search for truth.

It is this transition from the universality of cultural dominance to a properly philosophical universality that has begun to take place in our times. Resistance to the change in conventional thinking is understandably strong, though rarely expressed directly. One of the clearest statements comes, ironically, from Martin Heidegger, who, despite the influence of Taoist and Buddhist thought on his turn away from metaphysics, obscured the patrimony in an insistence on the dominance of the Western philosophical tradition:

The often heard expression “Western-European philosophy” is, in truth, a tautology.”... The word *philosophia* appears, as it were, on the birth certificate of our own history; we may even say on the birth certificate of the contemporary epoch of world history which is called the atomic age. That is why we can ask the question, “What is philosophy?” only if we enter into a discussion with the thinking of the Greek world.

But not only what is in question—philosophy—is Greek in origin, but how we question, the manner in which we question even today, is Greek. (Heidegger 1958: 31; 35; May 1996)

In more measured terms, the analytic philosopher Arthur Danto rejects the contribution of Asian thought, as he resists calling any of it “philosophy,” to Western moral philosophy on the grounds that it is too alien:

The fantastic architectures of Oriental thought... are open to our study and certainly our admiration, but they are not for us to inhabit... The factual beliefs they take for granted are, I believe, too alien to our representation of the world to be grafted onto it, and in consequence their moral systems are unavailable to us... No one can save us but ourselves. (Danto 1972: vii-xi)

In neither case, both of which are typical, is the rejection of Eastern philosophies from the forum proportionate with the problem at hand. It is a question of a habit of thought—the habit that I said at the outset is showing signs of coming apart at the seams. I believe the closing of the forum, and hence of the notion of “philosophical tradition,” to what lies outside the West, is a primarily a failure of will. The logical reasons against it, and the non-coincidence with the founding principles of philosophy, are too obvious. What is needed is a cultural disarmament of philosophy, a deliberate decision to abandon the aim of global dominance, a liberation of universality from particularity. This is what I meant by making philosophy, philosophically universal.

There is a Sufi story about a group of pilgrims making the Hajj to Maccah. The time comes for prayer and the pilgrims pause to spread their rugs on the ground, to bow down their heads turned to the Holy City to pray. One of them, a simple craftsman, bows down in the opposite direction, with his feet pointed to Maccah. An Imam happens to walk by and begins to upbraid the man in front of the other. “Blasphemer! Do you know that it is an insult to point your feet towards God?” The man stands up to face the Imam. “I am sorry, master, I did not know. But if you could be so kind as to show me where God is not, I will point my feet in that direction.” Much the same question has to be put to the Western philosophical tradition: Show us a culture or society in which that philosophy has nothing to say and which has nothing to contribute to philosophy, and let us exclude them from the philosophical forum. Meantime, let us suffer the irreverence of de-Westernizing the philosophical forum as a necessary means to expose the unreflected bias that has coiled itself up like a snake in the bosom of philosophy.

II

THE TEARS IN HABIT OF SEEING PHILOSOPHY as a fundamentally Western enterprise have shown up mainly in the West, it is during the past generation that it has begun to come apart at the seams. This could not have happened without positive inspiration from the East. As is well known by now in Japan, seen from the West, one of the strongest stimuli from modern Asian thought to open the philosophical forum to a truer universality has come from Nishida Kitarô and the principle figures after him in the Kyoto school, Tanabe Hajime, Nishitani Keiji, and Ueda Shizuteru. Although I have been fortunate enough to live in Japan while this was going on, I am not in a position to account for all of the fascination with these thinkers or the reasons for their success. At most I can try to reflect some general impressions I have gathered over the past twenty years of contact with scholars from the West interested in their writings. In doing so, I refrain from dealing with particular concepts in order to focus on what I called earlier the ongoing cultural disarmament of philosophy.

The first impression will, I am afraid, fall hard on the ears of professional Japanese philosophers, but I repeat it nonetheless. The contribution that Western philosophers look to Japan for is not the sort of contribution that mainstream philosophy in Japan has been trying to make for the past 150 years. The ideal of “Western learning, Japanese spirit” that inspired early interest in philosophy was an internal matter for Japan’s process of modernization and, as such, was of interest to students of Japanese intellectual history, but held little of interest for the philosophical community. As the preoccupation with the enhancement of the Japanese spirit retreated further and further into the background, so that by the 1960s it had become virtually invisible in most of Japan’s students of Western philosophy, the West expected another ideal to take its place, namely an ideal of making a Japanese contribution to a world philosophical forum. Insofar as Western philosophers have tended to ignore Japan, it is precisely because they perceive that this has not taken place.

In the opening remarks to the first issue of *Philosophy East and West*, John Dewey, though himself no student of the East, expressed a positive mood of openness to an Asian contribution to philosophy:

Under the pressure of political blocs that are now being formed East and West it is all too easy to think that there are cultural “blocks” of corresponding orientation. To adapt a phrase of William James, there are no “cultural block universes” and the hope of free man everywhere is to

prevent any such “cultural block universes” from ever arising and fixing themselves upon all mankind or any portion of mankind. To the extent that your journal can keep the idea open and working that there are “*specific* philosophical relationships” to be explored in the West and in the East and between the West and east, you will, I think, be contributing most fruitfully and dynamically to the enlightenment and betterment of the human estate. (Dewey 1951: 3)

To the eyes of the West, this is a challenge that rank-and-file teachers and scholars of philosophy in Japan have ignored. Structurally, Western and Asian philosophies have been kept at arm’s length in Japanese academia, even more isolated than in Western academia. The fact that this has brought suffering to any number of young doctoral students in the country eager to break the mold is an indication that things may be about to change, but for now the idea of philosophy as contributing to the “enlightenment and betterment” of humanity is all but eclipsed by the preoccupation with earning recognition as a specialist in one or the other Western thinker. Seen from outside, the “system” has failed to produce either Western philosophers raised in Japanese culture or Japanese philosophers fluent in Western philosophy. For all the importance that publishing in international journals has for the career and self-image of a young academic, it is not met with comparable recognition in the West. There the concern is for Japan to produce a higher percentage of distinctively Japanese contributions. Time and again, Japanese academics disappoint their Western counterparts by mirroring their own standpoint back to them, often clumsily, thus reinforcing the impression that they would be better suited to offer the kind of unique criticisms and original viewpoint that one would expect of a culture as different from those of the West as is Japan’s.

In some cases, the shock of discovering this fact has led some scholars to look more seriously at Japan’s original philosophical ideas and try to represent them to the West. My impression is that these efforts are taken more seriously abroad than they are inside Japan, where the idea of belonging to a “cultural block universe” seems to be a necessary condition for self-identity, or where treading outside one’s specialization is viewed as a philosophical sin rather than a virtue. In this way, they have contributed to the bias that the Western philosophical tradition is, and should remain, primarily a Western phenomenon.

The captivating thing about the Kyoto philosophers is precisely that they did take up this challenge, aiming at a contribution to philosophy made as persons *of* a Japanese culture but standing *on* a world forum. They spoke not as one cultural universe facing another, but as one culturally determined human mind to any mind that wished to listen, Japanese or foreign. Curiously, there is little complaint in the philosophical writings of Tanabe, Nishitani or Nishida about the exclaustation of Japanese thought from the philosophical tradition. Rather than rattle their chains at being denied access to the philosophical tradition as equals rather than simply study it as a foreign object, they simply set out to do philosophy. And they did it for a Japanese audience, none of them making efforts to have their works translated for Western consumption. If their Japanese readership found them hard-going at times, and complained of what they were doing to the language, they read quite naturally in translation and—insofar as I am able to judge—on the whole read better in Western languages than the translations of their Western counterparts read translated into Japanese.

These efforts, as it turns out, have been much stronger arguments against exclusivity than any complaints against the cultural hegemony of philosophy. They can be read, with profit, by philosophers in West with little or no knowledge of Asian intellectual history. This says a great deal about the quality of their performance. As I have never hesitated to state, they stand shoulder to shoulder with the best Western philosophers of their age. They are not only intelligible to the West; they have made a distinctive Japanese contribution to its philosophical tradition. Perhaps this is why the slide away from “specific philosophical” questions into the defense of a “cultural block universe” during a brief period is eyes with such disappointment. It has hardly had the effect of discoloring the whole of their work; on the contrary, it is the adventure of their work as a whole that has discolored their more or less nationalistic escapades of thought, to the point that no nationalist or Japanist for the past fifty years has cited Nishida, Tanabe, or Nishitani in their support.

III

THE KYOTO SCHOOL, IN ANY CASE, is only a small part of the challenge of Asian thought to the Western philosophical tradition. Indeed, its successes have prompted attention to more general demands lying beneath the surface for entirely too long. If these demands are not met, it is likely they will slip back into oblivion, at home and abroad, as quickly as they rose to attention.

Fundamentally, I see two problematic areas, the first more conscious in the West, and the second in Asia. In neither area can one count on leadership from educational establishments. On the contrary, they will no doubt wait until a path of least resistance has opened up before stepping on to it and announcing their permanent “reforms.” The initiative will have to come from within the community of scholars, and their young students, themselves.

The first area has to do with redefining the notion of philosophy in the West so as to return to the philosophical forum great areas of the intellectual history and activity of the East, from its exile, to departments of Asian Studies or Religion. Current definitions will only be displaced by a deliberate effort to name large areas of thought as “philosophy” without the qualification of “Asian,” which seems—at least at present—to cancel out what it is means to specify. If Japanese studying philosophy abroad were to meet the custom of having Asian thinkers dealt with as a normal part of courses on epistemology, cosmology, logic, and the history of philosophy, it is likely they would bring the habit back with them before long. But, however this comes about it will require texts to work with.

Journals and learned societies dealing with a range of Asian philosophies have generated a wealth of material in the West over the past fifty years, which has led to a revision of the contents of recent encyclopedias of philosophy, and to an impressive array of doctoral dissertations and monographs on particular thinkers. Still, the results are fragmented. In the case of Japan, there is still no comprehensive sourcebook of material from Kūkai to Nishida available in any Western language¹ It is a project many of us have talked about for the past fifteen years, and is only now nearing completion.

¹The only works of any length I know of by Western scholars to deal with this wider picture are: Gregor Paul, *Philosophie in Japan: Von den Anfängen bis zur Heian-Zeit* (1993), which only goes up to the Heian period and works from a definition of philosophy that would exclude the Kyoto school philosophers; Peter Pörtner and Jens Heise, *Die Philosophie Japans: von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (1995), which is extremely limited in its treatment of thought since the nineteenth century; Jesús González Valles, *Historia de la filosofía japonesa* (2000), which treats pre-nineteenth-century thought in too cursory a manner. The recent book by H. Gene Blocker and Christopher I. Starling, *Japanese Philosophy* (2001), offers a good survey and statement of the problem, but is too short to serve the purposes of a working text.

A second problematic area that bedevils the introduction of Asian thinkers into the world philosophical forum is the absence of an Asian philosophical tradition to compare with that of the West. The very idea of comparison is a difficult proposition on almost every count. To begin with, its underlying assumptions seem to be at odds with one another. On the one hand, the question could only arise from within a context that has such a tradition, rather well defined, long studied, and widely accepted both academically and spiritually. This is the standpoint that heads out looking for similarities, overlaps and differences. And whatever else it finds; it is likely to reconfirm the validity of the standpoint from which it set out, even if only because sorting out the findings is enough of a job without worrying about whether the original question might have been biased from the start.

That is one side of the picture. On the other hand, if this sort of comparative tradition is *not* sought, everyone ends up much the poorer. What Western intellectual history describes as “philosophical” gives a kind of magnet to dip into the vast spiritual resources of the East and draw out whole clusters of phenomena not often seen as having anything to do with one another. Not only does it offer a challenging counter-position to the philosophical tradition of the West, it suggests new affinities and different ways of understanding the East itself.

These two implications would appear to cancel each other out. If one focuses on the covert “Orientalism,” one foregoes the possibility of stimulating a new self-understanding in Eastern traditions. If one focuses on the search for philosophical ingredients in the East, one easily loses sight of the inventiveness and exportation of categories going on.

It would seem simple enough just to propose a less parochial definition of philosophy, one open to variations wider than those known in the West. Unfortunately, the impasse remains, because there is more involved than overcoming the imparity between the one who controls the questions and the one being questioned. In an important sense, there is nothing like a philosophical tradition in the East for the simple reason that in matters of spiritual tradition in general there is no “East” in the same sense that we can speak of a “West”—at least not yet. The difficulty lies not in that traditions that might constitute a cross-cultural “Eastern philosophy” are too many and too varied to permit a general classification. It is rather that these differences are not viewed within a tradition of shared texts. Geographically, and even more politically and economically, the East can be roughly identified. But the spiritual heritage of particular regions remains locked behind the heavy iron bars of language.

In the West, there is no less variety; and culture, geography, and language play a no less important role. The difference is that the major texts have been translated into languages that make them available to a general public. For the scholar, a reading knowledge of classical languages and a couple of major European languages leaves one equipped to survey the entire field comfortably. Or perhaps better put, it makes possible the idea of a field. This situation does not exist in Japan and its neighboring countries in the East. Over fifty years ago, the British historian E. W. F. Tomlin complained that only one ten-thousandth of the relevant literature in the East has been translated into Western languages. (Tomlin 1963: 15) The situation in the East, though better, is still appalling. The lack of a common fund of texts available in translations to Chinese, Japanese, and Korean scholars is aggravated by the fact that the number of scholars who can move freely in these three languages is no more than a small coterie. Broaden the scope to Mongolia, Central and Southeast Asia, and the distance from a true “philosophical tradition” grows greater still. What we have, instead, are particular traditions of thought—in the Far East, one thinks of the examples of Kamakura Buddhism, Shilla Buddhism, or Neo-Confucianism—that grow from common origins but end up fragmented by linguistic differences. Japanese scholars with knowledge of Chinese can recapture a part of the wider history; so, too, can Korean scholars studying the origins of Korean contributions to the field. But a living “tradition” that embraces all three is nonexistent.

As seen from the perspective of the West, without the development of these two projects, general surveys of philosophies in particular Asian languages in Western languages and a common corpus of texts shared by philosophers in the East, the pursuit of comparative studies is likely to remain piecemeal and beset with Western definitions of what constitutes philosophical discourse.

IV

BECAUSE I AM PERSUADED that it is the number and quality of translations, and not the quality of the untranslatable thought, that has kept the native philosophies of Japan on the sidelines both in the West and in its neighbouring countries of the East, I find it odd that philosophers on both sides of the divide continue to be detained by arguments that translation from Japanese into other languages is doomed to imperfection and misunderstanding: Japanese insufficiently conversant in the nuances of foreign languages mystifying the prose of their leading thinkers as if to keep it free of the contamination of other languages, and foreigners too addicted to academic precision to take the necessary liberties to produce translations that read naturally.

As Ortega y Gasset rightly notes, translation without interpretation is a naïve fantasy, and surely not everything is translatable. But interlingual translation is no more impossible than the transition from ideas to speech, where what is held in silence is important to understand what is communicated, but which we negotiate all the time in varying degrees of success.² Formal arguments against the translatability between languages have accumulated at least since the fifteenth century, and while there is good antidote there to mechanical theories of translation, the level at which the final position is true is uninteresting to philosophy.

Self-criticism is the soul of philosophy. And as Whitehead used to tell his students, “to be refuted in every century after you have written is the acme of triumph.” (Whitehead 1947: 122) I would add: to be refuted in several languages only sweetens the victory. Nothing finite is self-supporting and philosophical problems are no exception. Translators who enshrine a philosophical text in the contingencies of its birth place in the effort to give it an infinity beyond the reach of the time and culture of the language they are writing in are claiming an infinity for it that will only kill it in the end.

Of course, there is nothing to stop a particular philosopher from tying his thought to the language he is writing in, and tying it so tightly that translation becomes impossible without keeping the original terminology or forcing one’s own language to the most unnatural of contortions. Let us take an extreme and celebrated instance. When Martin Heidegger took the ordinary German word *dasein*, which simply means “being there,” applied it to the human way of being present, and then converted it into a noun, not only was he asking his German readers to adjust to an unnatural use of the language, but forcing his translators to carry that unnaturalness over into their own. The first English translation used the German *Dasein*. Heidegger himself stated repeatedly that he preferred simple English terms to forced neologisms, but in the end the German term won the day. The Japanese, ignorant of his advice, gave us a neologism that is of use only to readers of Heidegger and

² “A being incapable of renouncing the saying of many things would be incapable of speaking. Every language has a different equation of manifestations and silences. Every people keeps silence on certain things *in order to* be able to say others. For *everything* would be unsayable. Hence the enormous difficulty of translation: in it one tries to say in one idiom precisely what the language tends to silence.” José Ortega y Gasset (1970, 5: 444).

that ordinary Japanese dictionaries, if they carry the word at all, associated with the original German word *Dasein* rather than any native equivalent. The worst of it all is that in the translation, the ordinariness of “being there” is lost.

The failure of the translation to communicate is partly due to Heidegger’s binding of his ideas to his own language, but things do not stop there. The irony here is that by trying to twist Japanese around the use of ordinary words as technical jargon, it ends up rejecting Heidegger’s originality and imitating his weakness. Heidegger turned his own linguistic limitations (he could not even read English) into a virtue, believing that philosophy could only be done in two languages, German and Greek. While more polite to the Orient, he most assuredly did not expect any serious critique, let alone development, of his thinking, through Japanese translations. In a late interview that he asked to be published only after his death, he spoke about

[T]he special inner affinity of the German language to the language of the Greeks and their thinking. This is confirmed to me again and again by the French. When they begin to think, they speak German.³

The translator who contorts his own language in order to accommodate Heidegger assumes that his words can be treated at their lexical value, isolated from their living environment, and to that extent agrees with his assessment. To treat the text as sacred is to administer a sedative to one’s feeling for one’s native language. It seems that this is how Heidegger would have wanted it, but that was his weakness and the Japanese confirms it in trying to ignore it.

I do not mean to enter into a discussion about translating Heidegger, nor to insist that his is the only way to bind philosophy to language. There is no need to, since the pattern is a familiar one: the original question about the close bonds between a philosopher and his language, which any translator has to ask himself about again and again, is radically altered by the assumption that for one language to be translated into another, it must enter a state of suspended animation. In doing so, the translator deludes himself into being tied to *the same context* that the original text’s language is tied to. This is a kind of cultural rearmament with the lining turned inside out.

³ Interview published in *Der Spiegel*, 23 (1976: 217). See the comments by Walter Kaufmann (1980, vol. 2: 179-182).

Complaints about bad writing have, as I said, long accompanied philosophy. But only rarely is the nature of translated philosophy taken up as a serious part of self-criticism. As a young graduate student studying Hegel, I remember picking up Walter Kaufmann's recently published rendition of the notoriously difficult Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, which he ventured to assert was "easier to follow than the original." (Kaufmann, 1965: 364)⁴ Not only did he render the text in fluent and natural English, he produced a facing page of commentary explaining what he was doing and why. Though I lacked his nearly native feel for German to appreciate many of the fine points, I was struck by the difference with the standard translations in English and French we were made to consult in class. I saw connections and leaped to new ideas that were absent from my previous reading of the text. I think that forever changed my idea of what translation should aim at.

There are, of course, those who champion dense and halting style almost as a philosophical virtue.⁵ By far, however, the majority of great philosophers who have bothered to write about style have done so to applaud clarity and berate obscurity. A short example from C. D. Broad is typical:

I have an extreme dislike for vague, confused, and oracular writing; and I have very little patience with authors who express themselves in this style. I believe that what can be said at all can be said simply and clearly in any civilized language or in a suitable system of symbols, and that verbal obscurity is almost always a sign of mental confusion. (Broad 1924: 81)

⁴ Kaufmann's very critical views of translation and philosophical style are scattered throughout his books, but one of his most impressive appreciations of translation deals with Martin Buber's rendering of the Old Testament, highlighted by his harsh words for Heidegger ("As a stylist, Buber is above comparison with Heidegger whose prose... is gradually becoming more and more indistinguishable from the paradoxes published here and there."). See "Buber's Religious Significance," *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. by Paul Arthur Schlipp and Maurice Friedman (1967: 665–85).

⁵ The American gender theorist, Judith Butler's appeal to Adorno in her defense is a contemporary case. Though I esteem her ideas highly, I have a certain sympathy for a recent critic when he writes: "Her prose is unnecessarily dense and long-winded, and almost never fails to use jargon even where much more accessible vocabulary is available... However, although Butler's writing is like an explosion in a dictionary factory, if one takes time to dig through the rubble one finds that her ideas are actually quite straightforward." David Gauntlett (2002: Ch. 7). The Japanese translator, Takemura Kazuko notes the "difficulty" of the prose, and opts in the end for noninterference, on the ground that the

Such opinions are much more acceptable when directed at original texts, but somehow translations have had a privilege of exemption in philosophical circles that they have never enjoyed in literary ones. Vague and confused translation language is assumed to be the fault of the translated language, and there the matter ends. The problem is, the reader of the translation almost never trips over the style at the same places as the native reader of the original. In other words, the translator's policy of "non-interference" and "objectivity" can only be based on a lack of understanding of the enormous amount of interpretation that goes on in translating between languages. This is so independently of the quality of the original style. Indeed, reproducing the same quality of bad writing in languages as different as Japanese and European languages, would take the highest literary skills, perhaps even higher than carrying over the flavour of a translucent, flowing style. Few if any translators of philosophical texts possess this, and it is not reasonable to ask it. But neither is it reasonable to swallow without criticism the idea that translations that are tough to plow through are the result of either a flawed original or the distance between the two languages.

A translator sanctifies the text out of misplaced respect for the author. The amount of effort that goes into producing a translation only heightens the respect, and few translators would affront common sense with the arrogance to stand shoulder to shoulder with the text with the thought of improving it. This posture of enchantment before the original text is precisely the cause of the disenchantment of readers with the resultant translation. When a text is difficult to understand, it is assumed that the original is difficult. To the extent that the translation stumbles and grates on one's native sensitivities, there is no repressing the feeling that the translation is flawed, but even this does not bring the original into question. If anything, the flaws in the reproduction make the original shine all the more, like a distant and unapproachable star. This seems to me getting things backwards. Any sense of reverence communicated through a translation that tolerates irreverence towards one's own language and one's own demand for clarity is simply misplaced. And this can happen only because of the shared assumption that the work of translation was done in an objective, non-interfering manner. What is more, it all but removes the possibility of translation leaving a mark on literary style, the way, say, translations of Shakespeare left an indelible

translation may be cited. (Tokyo: Seidosha, 1999: 292, 295). It is precisely the predominance of "accurate citation" over legibility that I wish to argue amounts to a failure to even think about more than the surface problems of translation.

mark on the German language and introduced his name into classical German literature,⁶ or even the way nineteenth-century Japanese had to make grammatical adjustments in order to accommodate translations of foreign texts into the language.⁷

I would classify this “sacralization” of Japanese philosophical texts as a simple misclassification. Homer’s epics and the Koran are good examples of quasi-sacred texts, whose translation merits the kind of respect it seems to me that is accorded ordinary philosophical works by scholars of Japanese philosophy, reducing them to a comatose state in order then translate them “faithfully.” Their very survival across time sets them off from ordinary historical discourse. The appropriate form of translation for this is literal, the belief that the word-for-word technique is the ideal way of submitting oneself to the original text and eliciting the full meaning of the text. Very little, if any, classical Western philosophy belongs in the category of the sacred text in this sense. For the translator to take it as such is to make a fundamental hermeneutical mistake. I have the impression, however, that young students of philosophy in Japan, hoping to make a career in the discipline, take this sacralization as a matter of common sense. It further seems to me that this fixed idea of what constitutes a “faithful” reproduction of a text not only does not broaden the reading audience for philosophical texts—which is, after all, the point of translation—but actually stimulates philosophy’s appetite for swallowing its own tail.

Faithful translation, at least as I am understanding it here, always involves some balance of *mimesis* and *poesis*, between the attempt to preserve the original vitality of the text by trying to enter in and repeat the experience of the author, and the attempt creatively to read it from one’s own point in time (what Nietzsche called *erdichten*). While it is a matter of philosophical style how one strikes the balance, both are different again from the mere mechanical reproduction of the surface I have criticized above. Original philosophical texts are always closer to a musical score than they are to a bouquet of flowers. The music can be played again and again, with varying degrees of interpretation but never purely. The only kind of flowers that can be safely translated across time are dry flowers, and this is because they have been cut off from their roots.

⁶ Documentation of this process has been offered by Larson, K.E. (1987: 19-37).

⁷ Yanabu Akira has studied this question in depth, demonstrating how even very basic elements in the sentence structure of Japanese as it is written today came from the attempt to reproduce Dutch works in Japanese.

In either case, translation creates waste; it always diminishes the original, even when the style is an improvement in a literary sense. This is not simple falsification, but belongs to the same drive towards the future that makes all translation necessary, beginning with the translation of one's own thoughts and desires to oneself and others. There is always "more than words can tell," an element of *muthos* element in all *logos*.⁸ Mistranslation is one kind of lie; good translations are another. But both fragment and destroy in order to rebuild. The attempt to avoid all such deformation, or pretend that it can be avoided, is by far the greater lie.

That said, translation is tempted by two forms of betrayal, each of which is a form of linguistic madness. On the one hand, there is the belief that too much is forfeited for it to be done, and the perfect translation would be to teach people to read the original. The extreme case of this is Borges's Menard, who struggles so long with the text of *Don Quixote* that he ends up reproducing it word for word in the original. On the other hand, there is the belief that the text belongs to the translator and his age, that its native context is no longer relevant. In the extreme, the loss is ignored and the book read as a contemporary work. The text becomes like the prisoner in Paul Valéry's *Histoires briséés* who is exiled to a land where everyone knows him as someone he is not, and whose only salvation is to forget who he really is. Most translation falls somewhere in between.

When it comes to philosophical texts, surely some writers suffer in the translation more than others. For example, I have argued that the writings of the Kyoto-school philosophers Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani, do not suffer in the translation, surely nothing of the scale of what great stylists like Bergson and James suffers in Japanese. What is more, there is a sense in which for their permanent contribution to philosophy to be secured they must be read in translation, and these readings must be allowed to reflect back critically on the readings of those who work with the original texts. Despite all my complaints, I am persuaded that what philosophies lose in translation is generally trivial compared to what they gain. There are translations so bad that nothing happens at all, except that it is ignored. But a mostly competent translation is an event at least as important as the fact that the books are still read.

⁸ As Jacques Derrida has suggested, the story of the Tower of Babel is not just about the fragmentation of language but is "le mythe de l'origine du mythe, la métaphore de la métaphore, le récit du récit, la traduction de la traduction." *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (1987: 203)

The real issue of translation does not require the ability to do the work. It is self-evident or it is esoteric. I believe it is the former, and that twentieth-century Japanese philosophy, particularly the philosophy of Nishida and his leading disciples is one of the clearest examples of this.

If philosophy were only the history of philosophy, perhaps the need to desacralize our translations would not be so great. But insofar as philosophical texts excite the mind to connections not previously seen and enlighten aspects of the present that would otherwise go unnoticed, to pretend that their translation is no more than a crutch for the linguistically impaired is to forfeit the soul of the translator's vocation. Translation is not just memory, it is also anticipation.

V

PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION ASIDE, there is still the question of stimulating points of contact between Japanese philosophy and the Western philosophical tradition. Assuming that the notion of philosophy has to be broadened not only geographically but also ideologically, there is no reason to restrict contact to mainstream philosophy itself. Indeed, even in contributions that Japanese philosophy has to make to Western philosophical questions, there is no reason to restrict their resources to the writings of established philosophers. Rather than seek directly to house Western philosophy in those "fantastic architectures of Oriental thought" that Danto found uncomfortable quarters, it is possible to enter philosophy from its own fringes—in particular from the esoteric traditions of the West which have emerged from underground to play an important role in contemporary modes of thought.

Far from mere compliance with the fads of "New Age" thinking, what I have in mind is very much in line with what the Kyoto-school philosophers were doing. The criticism that these thinkers have bleared the lines between religion and philosophy that have taken so many centuries to draw and hence to liberate philosophy from being a mere *ancilla theologiae*, is likely to be taken seriously only in those circles least disposed to accept the contribution of Japanese philosophical thought to begin with. Still, at the same time, it is important to keep the philosophical tradition distinct from apologetic "theologies" affiliated with particular belief systems or sacred texts, of whatever historical religion.

This is not the place to argue for the affinities between the esoteric traditions of the West from Gnosticism to alchemy with the history of Japanese philosophical thought. Suffice it to say that there is at least one element of that tradition that has already served as a meeting point and which need to be explored further, namely mysticism. It comes as no surprise to find the great Italian scholar of mysticism, Ellemire Zolla, declaring that the philosophy of the Kyoto school is “the most important philosophy of the twentieth century.”⁹ Making due allowance for the hyperbole, the fact is that the interest in Western mystics by these Japanese thinkers has opened not a few thinkers in the West to the contribution Eastern philosophy has to make to their own thinking.

The question is a large one, but perhaps central is the according of the primacy in philosophical thought to experience—the starting point for Nishida, Tanabe, and Nishitani—that provides the immediate point of contact. Happily, this contradicts a longstanding way of contrasting Japan and Western thought that continues to obstruct the idea of a common philosophical forum. I cite one example.

For many years, D. T. Suzuki was fond of likening Zen to Western mysticism in his attempt to explain it to his audiences in the English-speaking world. Heinrich Dumoulin repeated the comparison in his 1959 book *Zen: Geschichte und Gestalt*. When the English translation of 1965 reached D. T. Suzuki, the year before he died, he wrote a review in English where he states:

I cannot go further without remarking on the major contention of this book, which is that Zen is a form of mysticism. Unfortunately, some years ago, I too used the term in connection with Zen. I have long since regretted it, as I find it now highly misleading in elucidating Zen thought. Let it suffice to say here that Zen has nothing “mystical” about it or in it. It is most plain, clear as the daylight, all out in the open with nothing hidden, dark, obscure, secret, or mystifying in it. (Suzuki 1965: 124)¹⁰

To anyone familiar with the major texts of the Western mystical tradition, the attempt to disassociate it from Zen on the grounds of its obscurity sounds wildly off the mark. If anything, the literature of Zen reads the darker and more mystifying. But there is more to Suzuki’s words than meets the eye.

⁹ The comment is cited on the cover of the Spanish translation of Nishitani’s *La religión y la nada* (1999).

¹⁰ In the same year, as we know from his late writing, Suzuki was reading Eckhart’s *sermons*.

Absent the firsthand experience of sitting in meditation, much in Zen appears alternatively esoteric and ridiculous. The same holds true for those who read the texts of Western mysticism without any feel for the experiential basis. This is why masters of both traditions have insisted, as Master Suzuki himself does, that the bewilderment is not the fault of the tradition but of those who look at it from the wrong standpoint. What Suzuki was offering to his Western readers was not an arcane Oriental wisdom, but a straightforward remedy for what he saw as the fundamental “rationalism” and addiction to two-valued logic of Western intellectual history. The mystical tradition, as he understood it, did no more than replace rationalism with mystification—hence the need to disassociate Zen from it.

As understanding of Western mysticism increased in Japan, Suzuki’s strictures were not only forgotten but turned on their head as Western mysticism came to be seen as a way to help clarify the philosophical foundations of Zen. Still, I think Suzuki has put his finger on a question of importance to many Western students of Japanese philosophy.

Conventional wisdom in Japan, both popular and scholarly, subscribes to Suzuki’s criticisms of Western rationalism as unsuited to the national temperament of the Japanese. While there is virtually no major movement or thinker in the intellectual history of Europe and the Americas that does not have its coterie of specialists, the study is carried on with the cold eye of the objective scholar, and applications to the realities of everyday Japan are filtered through more or less explicit assumptions of inalienable cultural differences. In this way, the benefits or “rational” thought are given free rein to penetrate those aspects of modern life that depend on it, but are forbidden entry to the unfolding of the Japanese soul from ancient times to the present. Matters of science and reason that are held to transcend cultural differences are pursued with the same fervor and devotion to objectivity as anywhere in the world. Matters of the heart, of language, and of religious experience, are restricted to the collective, though widely varied, pursuit of a self-understanding that will—indeed *must*—forever elude the understanding of the West. The fact that this assumption fits the archetype of the form of rationalism found in any number of forms in modern societies known as ethnocentrism is itself the study of objective study in Japan, but self-understanding is kept deliberately immune to influence from the results of such comparisons. Indeed, this self-immunization itself is seen as an unavoidable consequence that will never make sense to the prying eyes of the outside observer.

The Western scholar of Japanese philosophy, though seeking to make philosophy truly universal, often feels shackled by this subtle opposition. This is why things like the dialogue of the Kyoto school philosophy between the mystical tradition of the West, which directly challenge the modes of language and thought that uphold this conventional wisdom are so welcome. The dominant metaphor for criticizing rationalism as unsuited to understanding the depths of Eastern spirituality is really very simple. Spirituality is like a fixed amount of water to be divided between the glass of “reason” and the teacup of “feeling.” The West puts the greater part of the water into the former, the East into the latter. As reason increases, feeling decreases, and vice versa, (some, and Suzuki was among them, would replace feeling with “experience,” but the effect is the same). When one is doing scientific research or writing about Western history, one empties the teacup into the glass; when one thinks about the Japanese soul, one empties the glass back into the teacup. And every attempt to seek a “balanced” approach in self-understanding has to reckon on the loss of what defines each and hence ends up with an artificial and meaningless portrait.

The Kyoto school philosophers, like many students of the Western mystical tradition, raise a voice in protest against this way of thinking. Both show dualism of reason and experience to be a caricature as much of the Eastern mind as of the Western. And they show it not in any secret encoding hidden within the texts but very much on the surface. They see the human capacity for reflection like a small island set in a vast sea of the mystery of existence. To make the island larger does not reduce the size of the sea. It increases the size of the shoreline, hence of contact with the mystery.

The clue to keeping this viewpoint foremost, as we learn from mystical literature, is not to challenge its lack but to insist on the primacy of experience. Primacy does not have to mean temporally first or even hierarchically first, as Nishida and Suzuki tended to think. There is no need to see the primacy as one of comparison of value, as in the claim that “experience is primary to “reason.” I would rather understand the term to mean “absolutely and immediately relative.” That is to say, it always comes into the picture, it is always part of the equation and it is unavoidably present. This is not to say that it is itself an absolute, or that it somehow transcends or eclipses reason, memory, and moral judgment. It merely states that whereas most things are related indirectly to most others, in mysticism, as in the Japanese philosophy of the Kyoto thinkers, experience is *always directly related* to any discussion.

Conversely put, to abstract from concrete experience is as serious an offense as a logical contradiction is in syllogistic thinking. I believe it is this affinity that has drawn scholars of mysticism to an interest in the Kyoto schools, and Kyoto school philosophers to mysticism. If this be “fantastic architecture,” then it is an area of philosophy’s own background—or underground—that it has not figured out how to incorporate into the philosophical forum. Here again, it is the universality of philosophy that is the greater victim, not that which has been excluded. The word “philosophy” may, as Heidegger says, be inscribed on the birth certificate of Western history. But unless its many other names are recognized on the birth certificate of other civilizations, there is little hope of a world philosophical forum rising up to stem the ongoing colonization of thought that marches under the banner of “the global human community.”

Bibliography

- BLOCKER, H.G. and STARLING, CH.I., 2001 *Japanese Philosophy* Albany: SUNY Press.
- BROAD, C.D. 1924 Critical and Speculative Philosophy, in *Contemporary British Philosophy: Personal Statements* (1st. series), ed. J. H. Muirhead. London: G. Allen and Unwin.
- DANTO, A. 1972 *Mysticism and Morality: Oriental Thought and Moral Philosophy*. New York: Basic Books.
- DERRIDA, J. 1987 *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*. Paris: Éditions Galilée.
- DEWEY, J. 1951 On Philosophical Synthesis, *Philosophy East and West* 1/1 April.
- GAUNTLETT, D. 2002 *Media, Gender, and Identity*. London: Routledge.
- GONZÁLEZ V., J. 2000 *Historia de la filosofía japonesa*. Madrid: Editorial Tecnos.
- HEIDEGGER, M. 1958 *What is Philosophy?* New Haven, Conn.: College & University Press: Vision.
- KAUFMANN, W. 1980 *Discovering the Mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill, vol. 2.
- KAUFMANN, W. 1965 *Hegel*. New York: Doubleday.
- LARSON, K. 1987 The Origins of the ‘Schlegel-Tieck’ Shakespeare in the 1820s, in *The German Quarterly* 60.
- MAY, R. 1996 *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources: East Asian Influences on his Work* london: Routledge.

NISHITANI, K. 1999 *La religion y la nada*. Madrid: Siruela.

ORTEGA Y GASSET, J. 1970 Miseria y esplendor de la traducción. *Obras completas*. Madrid: Revista de Occidente, 5.

PAUL, G. 1993 *Philosophie in Japan: Von den Anfängen bis zur Heian-Zeit* Munich: Judicium.

PÖRTNER, P. and HEISE, J. 1995 *Die Philosophie Japans: von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. Stuttgart: Kröner.

SCHLIPP, P.A. y FRIEDMAN, M. (Eds.) 1967 *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*. La Salle: Open Court.

SUZUKI, D.T. 1965 *The Eastern Buddhist*, 1/1.

TOMLIN, E.W.F. 1963 *The Oriental Philosophers: An Introduction*. New York: Harper & Row); originally published in 1950.

WHITEHEAD, A.N. 1947 *Essays in Science and Philosophy*. N. York: Philosophical Library.