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RECENT WORK

# BOOK REVIEW ON *KYOTO SCHOOL PHILOSOPHY IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE: IDEOLOGY, ONTOLOGY, MODERNITY* (BY BERNARD STEVENS)*

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Bernard Stevens's *Kyoto School Philosophy in Comparative Perspective* takes us on a wild intellectual adventure of the Kyoto School philosophy and its ideological issues placed in wider perspective. But unlike other scholars who have written on the Kyoto School, Stevens includes other peripheral figures related to Japanese intellectual history such as Kimura Bin and Maruyama Masao, with the aim of providing us with a critical resource for further reflection. The central missions of this comparative investigation, as Stevens (2023) tells us, are the following: (a) "to clarify the ideological controversy that surrounds it [i.e., the Kyoto School]" (1) and (b) "to decrypt the sometimes enigmatic thought of Nishida by comparing it with better known European philosophers" (1). Stevens (2023) covers a full array of topics and issues, ranging from Kyoto School epistemology and logic to its philosophy of culture and philosophical anthropology, with a particular methodological focus on balancing a hermeneutic of tradition with a critique of ideology (18). This is the latest tale of Kyoto School scholarship, and it is filled to the brim with provocative insights, but it also stops short of delivering us from many of the puzzling clouds that orbit Kyoto School thought.

The book consists of nine intellectually distinct chapters, and an introduction and conclusion. The first chapter, titled "A Few Observations on Maruyama Masao," intends to bring the Kyoto School philosophy under the critical lens of historical and political thinker Maruyama Masao. It is difficult to ignore upon first reading, however, the peculiarity of including Maruyama Masao in a text about the Kyoto School. As Stevens (2023) claims, the reason for this move is due to the fact that "the more recent

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* Bernard Stevens (2023), *Kyoto School Philosophy in Comparative Perspective: Ideology, Ontology, Modernity* (London: Lexington Books), 171 pages. ISBN 978-1-66692-048-2

Japanese philosophical scene remains widely ignored" (25). Although such a move spins the audience into a misleading whirlwind around the title of the book (since Maruyama is not technically a Kyoto School thinker), it is also forgivable—Stevens wants to set the stage for how we can critically engage and reflect on Japanese modernity. What Stevens (2023) argues, nevertheless, is that Maruyama shows us how "the Japan of the twentieth century has in fact not been sufficiently modernized to be able to really ask the question of a possible 'overcoming' of modernity" (30). Maruyama is painted as a social justice warrior, fighting two ideological fronts: the totalizing commitments of modern Western subjectivism and fascistic fetishism. For those unfamiliar with Maruyama, this chapter is indeed interesting. But then again, one cannot help but feel slightly wary about Stevens's overall analysis when he fails to list Miki Kiyoshi in his discussion of the Japanese philosophers who distanced themselves from Marxist orthodoxy. If Mutai Risaku made the cut, why not Miki—who is one of the most influential (or, at the very least, the most prolific) Kyoto School thinkers? After all, Miki was expelled out of Marxist circles on account of his liberal sentiments at that time.

Chapter 2 is a continuation of Chapter 1, but with the specific aim of bringing Maruyama into conversation with Hannah Arendt. While both share a common concern around issues of fascism and totalitarianism, where Maruyama is valuable in this conversation, according to Stevens, is where Arendt is lacking—namely, around discussing the development of fascism in Meiji Japan. Stevens (2023) holds that Maruyama "sought to explain not only the conscious ideology of Japan's ultranationalism but also the often unconscious values and prejudices that underlay it" (45-46). But in the end, there are many lessons that can be learned from Maruyama's analysis: that is, (a) how Japanese ultranationalism is, to some extent, the result of its own imitation of Western modernity; (b) how Asian humanism, as depicted by Maruyama, can shed light on Arendt's work on the issue of "the common world of human actions as the basis for any free political life" (Stevens 2023, 53); (c) how we can read Watsuji Tetsurō's work as a philosophical consequence of Japan's wartime regime; and finally, (d) how we can further understand Islamic fundamentalism through the analyses of totalitarianism and fascism (in both Europe and Japan).

Enter Chapter 3. Here, we can see a strong moralistic tone imbuing the words of the page, even though Stevens denies doing so. In fact, in the words of Stevens (2023) himself, the "aim is not to perversely reawaken extinguished passions and old controversies" (57), but rather to rescue the humanistic and philosophical messages of the Kyoto School from its political ambitions while resisting the gradual erosion of democracy and proliferation of neo-fascism in both the East and West. Stevens first discusses the theme "Overcoming Modernity" (*kindai no chōkoku*, 近代の超克), or more specifically, the symposium that took place in Tokyo in 1942. And what he claims is that this symposium "primarily concerns ultranationalistic Japan in its confrontation with Europe and the United States" (Stevens 2023, 58), except that not all the participants at this symposium were ultranationalistic. Stevens fails to mention that much of the theoretical content articulated at these meetings was politically ambiguous and that the participants never really reached an agreement on much of anything. In

fact, contrary to Stevens's portrayal of the symposium, Nishitani, who was one of these attendees, argued that Japan as a nation itself must move beyond its self-centered standpoint by grounding itself in the selfless place of subjective nothingness, which would result in an opening up of a new world-historical standpoint based on cultural and nationalistic plurality.[1] Here, I think that Stevens could benefit from reading Takeuchi Yoshimi's essay "Overcoming Modernity" as well, where he claims that the real error of these symposiums was their failure to resolve the aporia of the West's colonial invasions and Japan's own colonial mission.[2] It is rather difficult, according to Takeuchi, to find a thick visible thread connecting the Kyoto School thinkers to Japan's wartime policy, and yet Stevens frames the story as if this connection is unequivocal—as if this debate has been settled years ago (but the debate is still ongoing!). To prove this connection, Stevens (2023) even sketches the theoretical link between Zen in Japan (which is one of the sources of intellectual inspiration for the Kyoto School) and the history of Japanese militarism, claiming that the disposition of Zen consciousness "fosters the acceptance of the political circumstances of the moment" (67), but then conveniently omits those historical examples where Japanese Buddhists actually engaged in political-economic resistance.[3]

Now Stevens is not entirely incorrect. It is true that Nishida's philosophy is largely apolitical (Stevens 2023, 60) and that much of the Kyoto School, including Miki (but excluding Tosaka), did not fully develop a political-economic theory that would explain the historical conditions of geo-political territories and the formation of nation-states. Such approaches to social history do come at a cost: they can only theorize resistance at the level of the personal or cultural particular, rather than at the level of the entire political or economic arena, that which otherwise would provide a much more robust form of resistance. The political ambitions of the Kyoto School philosophy offer a fine end point, they are just not necessarily a good starting point.

Chapter 4 is essentially Chapter 3 part II, which means that it also shares the same sort of problems Chapter 3 has. Stevens (2023) works to make explicit the political misjudgment of Nishitani's thought here by clarifying how the logic of resistance developed in the Meiji period would lead "Nishitani and the philosophers of the Kyoto School to adopt a stance of cooperation with Japan's imperialistic policy" (78). The term "cooperation" is key here, as it implies that the Kyoto School philosophers were not much more than mouthpieces for Japan's official doctrine on foreign policy. But such was not the case. Sure, there is a level of complicity Nishitani and the Kyoto School philosophers had with Japanese colonialism, but it would be an exaggeration to characterize these thinkers as "so easily deceived and seduced by the fascist ideological

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[1] John W. M. Krummel, "On Nothingness in the Heart of Empire and the Wartime Politics of the Kyoto School," in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy* 14.1 (2022): 101.

[2] Takeuchi Yoshimi (2005), *What is Modernity? Writings of Takeuchi Yoshimi*, trans. Richard Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press), 145-146.

[3] See, for example, James Mark Shields, "A Blueprint for Buddhist Revolution: The Radical Buddhism of Seno'o Girō (1889-1961) and the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism," in *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 39.2 (2012): 333-351.

fiction" (Stevens 2023, 79) of the wartime regime. Like other hungry scholars searching for this clear and indisputable relationship between Kyoto School thought and Japanese colonialism, Stevens presents the most cliché comparison: Heidegger and his involvement with Nazism. As an analog to Heidegger's philosophical work and political situation, Nishitani's philosophy of history "missed the complex concreteness of political reality" (Stevens 2023, 79) by virtue of operating at such an abstract level. True. Nishitani did not fully discuss the complexity of the political terrain of Japan's Shōwa era, but such a comparison also points us in the wrong direction in terms of how we can critique Nishitani's political engagements (or lack thereof). Heidegger joined the Nazi party in 1933 and remained a member of the Nazi party up until the end of WWII. There are also numerous examples of when Heidegger would make antisemitic comments, whereas Nishitani was never active in any political party, nor did he make any racializing remarks in the same way. But then again, Stevens (2023) is also not entirely incorrect either, particularly when he says that Nishitani "believed, quite naively, that the military authorities would listen to his advice and understand his views" (84). Stevens overall analysis is generally convincing, but his framing of the story is in need of some repair.

Chapters 5 and 6 go hand in hand as they seek to clarify the notions of time and reality from the standpoint of Nishitani's philosophy (and Nishida's philosophy, particularly in Chapter 6). These chapters are a departure from Stevens's political musings, instead exploring the theoretical parallels between Nishitani's and Nishida's philosophy with that of Heidegger's and Aristotle's as well as with Christianity and traditional Indian thought (e.g., Buddhism and Vedantic philosophy). Stevens's work here demonstrates his strong ability to expound Nishitani's and Nishida's most opaque concepts, providing the reader with a lot of insights to chew on. One of the big takeaways from these chapters is Nishida's earliest view of God *qua* reality, where God is conceived as a manifestation rather than a creation (Stevens 2023, 110). What Stevens (2023) teaches us is that, although Nishida's view of God differs significantly from the traditional Christian view of God, there are some commonalities with some of the Christian mystics, particularly when Nishida describes "God as 'the great personality at the base of the universe'" (110). Ultimately, what Stevens opens up in these chapters are potential avenues of comparative investigations.

Chapters 7 and 8 are where we see more of the soul of book (as indicated in the title): the Kyoto School in comparative perspective. Chapter 7 is a comparison between Nishida and Michael Henry and Chapter 8 is a comparison between Nishida, Merleau-Ponty, and Michael Henry. While comparisons have been made quite frequently between Nishida and Merleau-Ponty before, we have yet to see comparisons between Nishida and Henry. For those who have yet to read Henry's phenomenology, these chapters will come as a delight. But bear in mind that Henry's philosophy is not examined in full detail in these two chapters, and so the comparative analysis between these thinkers remains rather thin, given that the exegetical focus is mostly on Nishida's philosophy of life. What we can learn from Stevens's comparative investigations, nonetheless, is that not only does Nishida's philosophy fits more snugly within the tradition of phenomenology, as it theorizes how "the body is the instrument of the self-

formation and self-expression of historical life" (Stevens 2023, 129), but also that it goes beyond Henry and Merleau-Ponty by locating "consciousness in a source that is not simply preconscious but a greater dimension than individual consciousness…as something that is superconscious and yet worldly" (Stevens 2023, 130). Nishida, in this sense, can be thought of as the phenomenologist of all phenomenology.

Chapter 9 is a small deviation from the thrust of the book, as it does not deal with the Kyoto School directly, but rather indirectly. What we find in this chapter, nonetheless, is an elucidation of Kimura Bin's intercultural and Daseinanalytical psychiatry. As an heir to Nishida's, Heidegger's, and Watsuji's thought, Kimura's work "underlines the dimension of human betweenness and social spatiality, extended as far as to include the natural-climatic environment" (Stevens 2023, 135) in a way that "necessitate[s] the inclusion of a transcultural dimension in psychiatry" (Stevens 2023, 136). For Stevens (2023), what Kimura's "transcultural psychiatry" introduces is a potential "examination of non-European cultures [that will enable] us to catch sight of dimensions of humanity that the culturally limited perspective of Europe couldn't see" (137). The chapter is succinct, but also rich, and the chapter ends up leaving the reader with more questions than answers—for good or for worse.

This is not to say that Stevens's book furnishes us with just a handful of insights. On the contrary: there is a lot to learn from Stevens's discussion of the Kyoto School's most fundamental concepts. One of the strengths of the book, for example, can be found in the concluding chapter where Stevens (2023) explores the concept of emptiness, which he describes as a "field of energy or force that opens up in every person that has unloaded his or her ego and has opened him- or herself to the suchness of things" (148). Unpacking the tough, multifaceted religious language of the Kyoto School is a much-needed enterprise and this is where Stevens's work shines. It is also worth mentioning that the book itself is well-written, readable not only for scholars but for students as well. Many graduate students studying the Kyoto School will find this text quite useful in their research pursuits. But it is also worth mentioning in the same breath that Stevens also belongs to, or at least has one foot in, the coterie of North American critics (e.g., Harry Harootunian and Harumi Osaki) of the Kyoto School that believe this school of thought is a thinly disguised justification for Japanese aggression. There are certainly areas where we can criticize the Kyoto School philosophers, but we must criticize them fairly and accurately, and not tar them with the same brush. Otherwise, we risk reducing these thinkers to historical artifacts and thus lose the potential to treat their work as theoretical treasures that could assist us in understanding and addressing the problems of today's global world.

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