



Christopher S. Goto-Jones, *Political Philosophy in Japan: Nishida, the Kyoto School, and Co-Prosperity*

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FOR SOME YEARS NOW the debate over the collaboration of Nishida Kitarō, the greatest of Japan's twentieth-century philosophers, with the regime that waged the Pacific War has been defined by opposing poles: at one end, those who are determined to implicate him to one degree or another; at the other, those who are determined to pay tribute to his resistance to the war. A broad spectrum of opinion falling between the extremes has juggled the arguments from both sides in the attempt to strike a more reasonable balance. Dissatisfied both with the arguments and the material on which the competing positions have been based, Christopher Goto-Jones has set out to redefine the question from the ground up. The results are so impressive that it will be hard to think about the debate from now on without taking into account the wider perspective he has opened up for us.

The core thesis of the book is that Nishida did in fact develop a consistent political philosophy whose beginnings can be found in *A Study of the Good*, that these ideas have evident roots in Confucian and Buddhist tradition, that his stance was radically at odds with Japan's military ideology, and that his strategy for developing that stance, from roughly 1937 on, and applying it to current events was to reject the expropriation of language by the imperialist ideologues and restore a number key terms to their more original and authentic meaning.

Jones sets out to defend his thesis by beginning with a cursory but carefully documented examination of the political dimension of the classical notions of harmony and awakening as they are reflected in Buddhist, Confucian, and to some extent Shinto tradition. He insists that attempts to dislodge Nishida from the very different background out of which he wrestled with philosophical questions otherwise familiar to the Western reader effectively superficialize texts that deserve to be read more deeply. Even without reviewing the proof of how this background influenced Nishida's writing, the claim makes such good sense that one has to wonder why more has not been made of it until now. As short as Jones's treatment is (from Prince Shōtoku to the twentieth century in 20 pages), and as many problems as there are with tracing these large ideas across massive shifts of social and cultural change, the case for locating Nishida within this larger story is all but self-evident.

The proof that Jones himself seeks is interspersed with his attempt to trace the birth of a political philosophy in *A Study of the Good*. Here the argument becomes a little more tenuous, if only because of the demands he is making on that single text

which he takes as representative of “the early Nishida.” There are three very different things we see him trying to extract from the text. First, he insists that there is a solid basis for a political philosophy both in the overall structure of the book—whose central section has to do with an evaluation of models of moral conduct—and in a number of specific statements Nishida makes. These statements are compared with classical philosophical positions, principally Kant’s, to suggest affinities. There are two critical issues here: whether general statements about morality qualify as a foundation for a political philosophy, and whether single sentences can be said to represent the conclusion to actual philosophical arguments by associating them to other thinkers who had argued more extensively to similar conclusions. Second, Jones detects “clear resonances” to traditional Eastern ideas echoing here and there throughout Nishida’s book, the discovery of which depend mainly on the assumption that they must have been in Nishida’s mind even though there is no direct reference to the fact. This also allows him, for example, to take a couple of passages in which Nishida cites familiar sayings from the Confucian Analects as demonstration of the adaptation of a whole bloc of related ideas from the wider Confucian tradition. Finally, in the course of his study Jones points out a number of occasions on which Nishida, in a more politically charged context, refers back obliquely to *A Study of the Good*, leading him to conclude that Nishida himself saw the work as the foundation for his thoughts on Japanese nationalism. I wonder. Given that *A Study of the Good* was an important part of the reputation he enjoyed as a philosopher and was considered above suspicion by the thought police; and given, too, that some of the originally harmless and oracular statements of that book would have run the risk of being read as moral judgments against the ruling authorities, could it not be that the indirect reference was less part of a scholarly argument than it was a guarded way of expressing his displeasure at the turn of events? The question confirms a more general suspicion about whether *A Study of the Good* can meet the expectations that Jones brings to it. As he himself notes, Nishida was under no political pressure at all when he wrote *A Study of the Good*, but this only leads one to ask what kept him from laying out a political philosophy more carefully when he could have done so, if that was in fact one of the things he intended to do with the book.

In a sense, all of these suspicions are easy to come by precisely because they abstract from the wider context of Jones’s reading of *A Study of the Good*, namely, the attempt to clear Nishida’s political philosophy of complicity in Japan’s wartime ideology. Like Ueda Shizuteru, Jones finds Nishida engaged in a kind of “tug of war” with the military authorities over the meaning of words. Where he differs, he tells us, is in the attempt to locate the engagement in the published texts themselves and not to rely heavily on statements in letters and diaries. In doing so, he means to take direct issue with scholars who have argued the precise opposite case from the texts. Impatient with blanket condemnations cast by persons who show no understanding of Nishida’s thought and seem satisfied to denounce an entire philosophical career on the basis of isolated statements that could have, if spoken by certain persons with certain assumptions, been taken to construe support of a fascist regime, Jones

sets out to place Nishida in a carefully painted foreground and a fainter but no less important background. The audacity of using the word co-prosperity in the subtitle of the book shows how seriously he takes his claim. This attempt to “relocate the later Nishida” is the heart of Jones’s book and it beats with the fervor of someone who knows what he is talking about mired knee-deep in the writings of people who do not. I will not even attempt to reproduce his arguments here. Even to list the comments scrawled in the margins of my copy would take me far beyond the confines of a short review. Suffice it to say, scholarship on Nishida’s political philosophy has turned a corner with this book.

As an ancillary thesis, Jones presents Tanabe and Nishitani (and to a lesser degree, Miki) as having forfeited their philosophical souls to keep their public voices during the war years. The purpose of this argument is to support the exoneration of Nishida, but the results are less convincing than the other chapters for one important reason: Jones fails to apply the same method to their writings that he did to Nishida’s. Gone are all echoes of Confucian and Buddhist thought. Gone is the wider context of thought against which to read their wartime statements. Gone, too, is any hint of a struggle for reclaiming a language wrenched from its context in service of the vilest of causes. Even the careful delineation of modes of dissent and the orientation of political discourse that Jones is at pains to draw in an opening chapter seems to have been set aside, leaving Tanabe and Nishitani as a kind of consolation prize for the Nishida critics whose arguments Jones had beat into the ground. He insists that they had in effect misrepresented Nishida’s philosophy and quoted it out of context. I think this judgment deserves a little more attention, without the assumption that Nishida’s leading disciples considered themselves in any sense the representatives of their teacher. There are places in this section of the book, including in his treatment of Miki Kiyoshi, at which I had to wonder whether Jones had not caught the very contagion he had set out to cure. In any case, even these suspicions did nothing to dampen my enthusiasm for the argument he has carefully framed for Nishida.

Jones’s notes are a good read in themselves, his bibliographical sources enlightening, his writing uncluttered with esoteric jargon, and his translations from the Japanese spot-on. (The only quibble I would have is with rendering 歴史の身体的社会 with the rather inelegant “historical-bodily societies.”) The University of Leiden is to be congratulated for launching its new series on Modern East Asian Politics and History with a book of this caliber. But let me add at once: it deserves an audience much wider than that which the outrageous price tag the publishers have assigned is likely to attract.

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