

# Tosaka Jun's Critique of Hermeneutics

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## Introduction

In *Philosophers of Nothingness, An Essay on the Kyoto School* (2000), James Heisig laments that recognition of the Kyoto School of Philosophy and its achievements has generally been retarded both in and outside Japan. The reason for this retardation is that the formative years of the Kyoto School (the decades leading up to the Second World War) coincided with a period of intense Japanese nationalism. As a result, the Japanese themselves did not consider the Kyoto School worthy of devoting much attention to after the Second World War; any mention of the Kyoto School had disappeared by the 1970s. Western philosophers eventually took an interest in the Kyoto School, initially by simply ignoring its troubling political record (Heisig, 2000, pp. 3-6). The Kyoto School of Philosophy formed itself around its main representative Nishida Kitarō<sup>1</sup> in the years after the publication of his maiden work *Zen no Kenkyū* (translated as *An Inquiry into the Good*) in 1911. If one ignores his political writings, then from Nishida's oeuvre can be distilled a religious philosophy of mind which draws on ideas formulated in Zen Buddhism to theorize a form of consciousness that transcends the dichotomy of subject and object (what Nishida's friend D.T. Suzuki would identify as *satori*, or enlightenment). It comes as no surprise that Heisig, a leading scholar on the Kyoto School, chooses to depoliticize Nishida as much as possible. That behind Nishida's seemingly innocent religious philosophy of mind possibly lurk fascist motivations is something any conceptually-oriented philosopher would rather leave to colleagues from the Area Studies to further unravel. To comparative philosophers such as Heisig, Nishida's achievements in the field of metaphysics, and certainly not his political mishaps, deserve most of our scholarly attention.

However, philosophers cannot completely ignore the role politics play in shaping philosophical thought. Tosaka Jun, a contemporary critic of the Kyoto School of Philosophy whose critique of hermeneutics forms the subject of this paper, poured a lot of effort into demonstrating this. He argued that much of the thought of the Japanese philosophers of his generation was informed by an ethnocentrism fueled by the ambitions of a nationalistic government. When it comes to showing how politics shape philosophy, his scathing attack on the Kyoto School is still relevant today. The lofty ideal of Zen enlightenment, to apply Tosaka's analysis to the most prominent example, quickly loses its value and becomes wholly vacuous if its Japanese proponents are convinced that only they are sensible enough to experience it, and are thereby the only ones that have access to the world as it supposedly 'really is'. The idea of Zen enlightenment may just have been redeveloped by Japanese intellectuals specifically in order to combat Western claims to universalism, and to thereby contest the global political hegemony of the Western powers at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. If this is true, then comparative philosophers can no longer unproblematically dispose of this concept's ethnocentric kernel in order to universalize its application. Instead, philosophers in the West need to be cautious of the extent to which concepts formulated by thinkers of the Kyoto School have been informed by, to put it crudely, a political ideology that encouraged ethnocentric irrationalism.

This paper offers an investigation of the roots of the concepts and methods that Kyoto School philosophers employ – an investigation that is not only conceptual but also historical. I do this, not only by retrospectively retracing the origin of the ideas of prominent Kyoto School philosophers such as Nishida and Tanabe Hajime, but also by considering

the methods of those who were drawn to, and took their inspiration from, Nishida's philosophy, such as Suzuki, Kuki Shūzō and Watsuji Tetsurō. For the purposes of this paper, I will treat all of these thinkers as Kyoto School philosophers, even though their association with the school (especially in the case of Suzuki) might have been rather loose at times. The main focus of this paper is Tosaka's critique of the hermeneutic methodology of the philosophers mentioned above. With Tosaka, I want to question the political motivations of these thinkers, and show why their application of hermeneutics (what Tosaka calls their 'philologism') is problematic. Moreover, I want to show that according to Tosaka, part of the problem lies with hermeneutics itself, rather than only with its application.

In the first section, I explain the circumstances under which philosophy came to fruition in Japan. I briefly recount Nishi Amane's introduction of philosophy to Japan upon returning from his journey to Europe in 1865. This is followed by a discussion of two European intellectuals that shaped the direction of early Japanese philosophical thought: Raphael von Koeber (who taught aesthetics and hermeneutics at Tokyo University), and Paul Carus (who influenced Suzuki, and thereby indirectly Nishida). I then turn to examine Nishida's notion of *junsui keiken* (pure experience), and show how this notion relates to the hermeneutics of Watsuji and Suzuki's understanding of *satori* (enlightenment). I end the first section by discussing the anti-modernism of Kuki, who, instead of delving into ancient texts, hermeneutically reconstructs an eighteenth century Edo (the city known today as Tokyo) aesthetic style known as *iki*. The second section concerns Tosaka's criticism of these various applications of hermeneutics. He argues that we should focus on what he calls 'everydayness', and not have an idealized past serve as a model that dictates what we should do in the here-and-now. The problem with such an idealized past is that it constitutes a separate world of meaning which is easily manipulated by those in power and made to serve elitist political goals. In the third section, I turn to Tosaka's 1935 book *Nihon Ideorogiron* in order to reconstruct his critique of the hermeneutic method itself. Tosaka thinks that hermeneutics is inherently oriented towards the past, something which he shows through a discussion of the hermeneutics of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey and Martin Heidegger. As a Western methodology for uncovering meaning from the past, Tosaka deems hermeneutics fundamentally unable to assist

the Japanese in understanding their own historical condition. He argues that hermeneutics merely concerns itself with what has already been done, and never with actual problems at hand. The fourth section briefly considers whether Tosaka's criticism of hermeneutics and the Kyoto School is fair. I conclude that although Tosaka's own methodological orientation limits a fair assessment of the Kyoto School of Philosophy, he nevertheless shows us why Western philosophers in our day and age have to at least be wary of too hastily and uncritically drawing inspiration from it.

### The Kyoto School and hermeneutics

The forced opening up of Japan in 1855 by American Commodore Matthew Perry made it clear to the Japanese military government at that time, the Tokugawa shogunate, that its policy of seclusion (Japan had been closed off to the outside world for over two hundred years, highly restricting trade with foreign countries) was no longer tenable. The shogunate realized that it would have to catch up with the West in order to survive in a world in which most of Asia had been colonized. Between 1862 and 1867, a small number of Japanese scholars was sent out to the academic centers of the West in order to study Western forms of knowledge. Among them was Nishi, who was dispatched to Leiden University in 1863 to study law. He had studied Dutch in the capital Edo and was a bureaucratic intellectual involved in translating Western works (generally on science) for the Tokugawa shogunate (Havens, 1970, pp. 40-76). While abroad, Nishi soon turned his attention to the study of philosophy. He is generally credited as the person who introduced Western philosophy to Japan. Besides the word *tetsugaku*<sup>2</sup> (philosophy), he is responsible for translating into Japanese a large quantity of philosophical vocabulary still in use today. Since he focused mostly on the empirical philosophy of Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, and hardly on the German idealism that would gain popularity among those associated with the later Kyoto School of Philosophy, he has been also called the 'isolated father of philosophy in Japan' (Takayanagi, 2011, p. 81).

German idealism found its way to Japan after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 (which restored the emperor as the head of state). Following the Meiji Restoration, contact with the outside world intensified as the

country attempted to rapidly modernize itself. As a result of the active pursuit of modernization, foreign intellectuals were invited to lecture at the universities of Japan, and Japanese students actively sought out ways to study in the West. Two Europeans that shaped early Japanese philosophical thought were Von Koeber and Carus. Von Koeber arrived in Japan in 1893 and started teaching at the University of Tokyo. Among his students were Nishida, Watsuji and Kuki. Von Koeber placed special emphasis on the theory of aesthetics of Arthur Schopenhauer, encouraging his students to go beyond Immanuel Kant's theory of the aesthetic judgment and to see art as a way to overcome cultural decadence (which, in Von Koeber's eyes, plagued nineteenth century Europe). As Alejandro Bárcenas puts it: '...aesthetics was set before them [the students of Von Koeber, DP] as a means to preserve classical culture from destruction, to overcome the dominance of scientific knowledge, and to connect meaningfully with the world as a whole.' (2009, p. 17) At the same time, Von Koeber exposed his students to the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and Karl August Beck. His approach to hermeneutics took as its starting point the interpretation of ancient texts. Von Koeber provided his students an impetus to investigate their own culture by applying the hermeneutic method to traditional Japanese concepts (Mayeda, 2006, p. 6). He wanted to convey to his students that European modernization was not something to be admired and striven after, but rather a sign of its cultural decay. He urged the young philosophers studying under him to delve into their own past for models on how to reform their society, instead of mindlessly emulating European culture.

Two ancient texts that came to be subjected to hermeneutical interpretation by Von Koeber's students were the *Kojiki*<sup>3</sup> and the *Nihon Shoki*<sup>4</sup> (together called the *Kiki*), which were composed at the beginning of the eighth century of the Common Era. These texts were seen as central to the people of Japan, as they (to a large extent mythologically) describe the birth of the nation. The *Kiki* provide descriptions of historical events that overlap in some, and conflict in other cases – hence the need for interpretation. To the interpreters of the Meiji period (1868-1912), it was important to discover the 'authentic truth' hidden in the texts in order to legitimize an imperial rule that had only recently been restored (Isomae, 2014, p. 1). The preceding Tokugawa shogunate had been perceived by

the intellectual elite as reluctant of large-scale reform, which the Meiji emperor actively pursued instead.<sup>5</sup> These intellectuals thought that it was imperative for the survival of the Japanese nation to modernize in order to create a strong military that could compete with the armies of the Western powers (the national slogan of the Meiji period being *fukoku kyōhei*, 'enrich the state, strengthen the military'; Beasley, 1972, pp. 1-2). Watsuji would go on to publish a book on the *Kiki* in 1920, titled *Nihon Kodai Bunka*,<sup>6</sup> in which he argued that the *Kiki* had their origins in an oral tradition. This was important, since the influx of Chinese characters at the time the *Kiki* were compiled, betrayed possible Chinese influences, a fact the Japanese were desperate to denounce. Many subsequent attempts were made to interconnect the *Kiki* and the idea of a 'Pure Japanese Culture' (Beasley, 1972, p. 6).

Carus was a German orientalist and scholar of religion. D.T. Suzuki, who is considered the most important figure in the spread of Zen Buddhism to the West, began studying under Carus when he moved to La Salle, Illinois in 1897. Carus thought there was no essential difference between scientific and religious truth. To have faith means to place one's trust in this unified truth. It was unnecessary to completely do away with old religions – instead, they had to be purified of irrational elements. He considered Buddhism the most scientific of all religious systems, since it ignores all metaphysical assumptions and philosophical postulates and concerns itself only with the facts of pure experience. Although Suzuki himself would eventually deny that Carus had been much of an influence on the development of his thought, most of what Suzuki would later claim to be Zen quite neatly matches how Carus thought about Buddhism (Sharf, 1993, pp. 13-17).

Through Suzuki, the influence of Carus extends all the way to Nishida, who became Suzuki's lifelong friend after meeting him in high school; the two shared an early interest in Zen (Sharf, 1993, p. 12). Nishida's own philosophical enterprise can be summed up as a lifelong elucidation of the concept of *junsui keiken* (pure experience). This notion is used by Nishida to designate the condition of experiencing reality itself, without it being in any way constituted by the subjective categories of thought (Maraldo, 2015). Suzuki would equate Nishida's concept of pure experience with

the experience of *satori* (enlightenment) that could be reached by means of Zen practice, an Eastern Buddhist tradition that the Japanese claimed to have had perfected (Sharf, 1993, p. 24). This opened up the idea that the Japanese had some form of privileged access to noumenal reality – an idea with which Western claims to universalism could be contested. Watsuji would attempt to locate the origins of the concept of ‘pure experience’ in the works of the ancient poets of the *Manyōshū*,<sup>7</sup> ‘...whose feelings still retain a virgin simplicity as a single undivided experience, [and who] are not yet troubled by this division of the subjective and the objective.’ (Furukawa, 1961, p. 224) But it seems that more than the musings of ancient poets, it had been Carus’ remarks about Buddhism’s concern for the facts of pure experience, combined with William James’ ideas on the topic, that inspired Nishida to come to his notion of *junsui keiken*. James’ influence is readily apparent in the opening pages of his 1911 work *Zen no Kenkyū*, where Nishida writes the following (I have added his own footnotes in brackets):

An abstract concept is never something that transcends experience, for it is always a form of present consciousness. Just as a geometrician imagines a particular triangle and takes it to be representative of all triangles, the representation element of an abstract concept is no more than a type of feeling in the present [James, *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1, chap. vii.]. And if we consider the so-called fringe of consciousness a fact of direct experience, then even consciousness of the various relations between experiential facts is – like sensation and perception – a kind of pure experience [James, ‘A World of Pure Experience’.] (1990, pp. 4-5)

*Zen no Kenkyū* established Nishida’s name in Japan and launched his academic career. Taking up the chair of philosophy at Kyoto Imperial University in 1914, he came to influence a whole subsequent generation of Japanese philosophers – a generation that increasingly found itself struggling to liberate Japanese philosophy from its Western heritage.

Kuki, one of Von Koeber’s students and later one of Heidegger’s, was one such philosopher who attempted to go beyond Western thought. His hermeneutical undertaking of reviving classical Japanese culture in order

to educate the alienated masses (who were rapidly westernizing) did not so much involve the study of ancient texts such as the *Kiki*, but rather focused on the pre-capitalist culture found in early nineteenth century Edo. In his 1930 work *Iki no Kōzō*,<sup>8</sup> Kuki identified *iki* as a uniquely Japanese aesthetic style that had come to fruition at the end of the late eighteenth century, and which was therefore free from the influence of Western metaphysics. An understanding of *iki* could point to authentically Japanese ways of being, and provide a way to rid Japanese society of foreign modernistic influences (Harootunian, 2000, 31). However, as Leslie Pincus points out, Kuki was only able to formulate his critique of modernity precisely because he was a part of it. More importantly, the hermeneutical tools he had used to recover *iki* from the past had been provided by Westerners in the first place. The fact that Kuki searched for the distinctively Japanese in the recent past rather than ancient times belies the influence of Dilthey, the father of cultural hermeneutics, who argues interpretation can only reconstruct lifeforms that are at least minimally familiar to us. Hermeneutics was meant to recover exactly those traditions from which the present was about to be estranged (Pincus, 1991, pp. 145-146). Kuki, it turns out, had only been trying to escape the lion by hiding in its den.

Others, such as Watsuji, went further into the past to locate the Japanese spirit, but all these attempts, like Kuki’s, simply ended up being nothing more than constructions that tried to locate certain eternal characteristics of the Japanese people in purportedly age-old traditions and classical texts. Possibly in order to satisfy government officials (and out of fear of being subjected to censorship in the future), Nishida somewhat reluctantly joined this trend of establishing the timeless traits of the Japanese people in a 1934 essay (translated as *The Types of Culture of the Classical Periods of East and West Seen from a Metaphysical Perspective*) in which he wrote that the difference between the metaphysics of the West and the East is ultimately reducible to fundamental differences in culture. The ultimate ground of Western metaphysics is that of being, while that of Eastern metaphysics is nothingness. Since Japanese culture, Nishida argued, is based in *zettai-mu* (absolute nothingness), the Japanese inherently prefer ‘...immanence to transcendence, the here-and-now to the eternal, emotion to intellection, family bonds to general law and order, the formlessness of time to the solid geometry of space.’ (Heisig, 2001, pp. 86-87) These characterizations of



the Japanese were certainly met with enthusiasm by those in power, and it was not long before Nishida was invited by the government to a committee to reform academia to better reflect the Japanese spirit. In 1935, this government fell to a military coup by far-right nationalists, and fears that the freedom of thought and expression would be restricted in the name of national unity would soon become reality (Heisig, 2001, pp. 88-89). It is in this difficult period that Tosaka would write most of his works.

### Tosaka's general critique of Kyoto School hermeneutics

In 1935, Tosaka's book *Nihon Ideorogiron*<sup>9</sup> is published (a title inspired by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Die Deutsche Ideologie*). In this book, Tosaka offers an attack on Kyoto School thought, partly through a critique of their use of hermeneutics. Tosaka himself was born in Tokyo in 1900 and studied philosophy in Kyoto under Nishida and his successor Tanabe, graduating in 1924. In the late 1920s, his attention switched from Neo-Kantianism to Marxism. From then on, he began investigating ideology rather than scientific methodology (the latter of which Tanabe had been primarily concerned with at that time). He co-founded the Society for the Study of Materialism, and made it a vehicle for battling militarism and irrationalism. Perceived to be a threat to national unity (confirming that Nishida's fears were in fact real), he was dismissed from his teaching position in 1934 for 'seditious thought'. He was eventually arrested under the Peace Preservation Law in 1938, and died in Nagano Prison in 1945, on the day the United States dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki (De Bary, Gluck & Tiedemann, 1964, p. 251). Before turning to Tosaka's more fundamental critique of hermeneutics itself in the next section, I will first provide an overview of his problems in general with the appropriation of hermeneutics by the thinkers of the Kyoto School.

I will begin with the object which the Japanese philosophers hope to distill using their interpretative strategies, namely the authentic Japanese spirit. Tosaka thinks the quest for the Japanese spirit is the result of a tendency towards Japanism (*nihon shugi*), which he describes as a social activity that is backed by nothing but an emotion, and as such is intellectually empty. Japanism concerns the attempt to constitute a universe of

meaning that separates itself from concrete historical reality by suggesting there is such a thing as a unique Japanese spirituality, an idea which to Tosaka is nonsensical, ridiculous and childish. As De Bary, et al., translate him:

...in essence (...) the Japanese spirit – or what Japan is in itself – is not, according to Japanism's own insistence, an explainable object; indeed, when closely scrutinized, it is nothing other than a method and a principle employed in explaining everything rather arbitrarily. However, arbitrarily bringing forth the single geographical, historical, and social existence in the universe called Japan and letting it become a kind of philosophical principle is, in essence, something very weird when considered from the standpoint of common sense. Indeed, if this were a philosophy termed 'Venus-ism' or 'Daffodil-ism', no one would ever take it seriously from the beginning. But the problem is that at the same time that it can be thought that Japanism has no rational or scientific content whatsoever, one is able arbitrarily to read into it any content whatsoever. (Tosaka 1977, pp. 146-147; De Bary et al., 1964, p. 255)

In other words, the meaning that Japanese hermeneuticians purport to uncover in ancient texts is in fact the result of employing an interpretative principle that can be conjured up to apply to anything, anywhere – thus rendering all their efforts fundamentally meaningless. He goes on to cite Takasu Yoshijirō, who claims that the Japanese spirit '...consist[s] of such things as that it is "life-creationistic", "centered and unwavering", "excels in cohesion and harmony", "takes as its principle positively to progress and expand", "has the characteristic of clarity", "places emphasis on practice and the actualization of the Way."' (De Bary et al., 1964, p. 253) All of these qualifications, however, are according to Tosaka either retraceable to foreign influences, or can be applied universally, that is to say, to any culture anywhere, anytime, and therefore describe nothing unique. Needless to say, Tosaka would consider the same principle to be at work when Kuki, studying the culture of the late Edo period, claims to have uncovered *iki* to be the essence of the Japanese spirit, or when Nishida, studying Buddhist texts, claims it to be *zettai-mu*. The only central tenet Tosaka is able to infer from these strategies to uncover the Japanese spirit is that this spirit is supposed

to be superior to that of other people. However, what sort of thing the Japanese spirit is and how it is supposed to be superior has not been given a sufficiently rational explanation (De Bary et al., 1964, p. 255).

Since Japanism constitutes an abstract universe of meaning of its own, it has nothing to do with daily reality. It is precisely the everydayness (*nichijōsei*) of daily reality that Tosaka wishes to draw attention to. Daily customs are in need of interpretation. Something as mundane as clothing requires philosophical explanation (Harootunian, 2000, pp. 119-120). Rather than abhor the masses, an effort should first be made to understand them. This is because, to Tosaka, the everyday is the site where history unfolds itself. Minimal day-to-day changes in customs, reflected in commodities such as clothes, make up history. The masses, more so than the elites who are the ones to write history down as a narrative, are essentially involved in its production. By dwelling in an idealized past in an effort to reconstruct bygone traditions and sensibilities, the Kyoto School philosophers (representing the elite) effectively ignore the potential that is hidden in the current historical epoch, the here-and-now. The fact that the Kyoto School philosophers make use of Western hermeneutical tools to search in the past for the cultural essence of the Japanese people implies a tacit acceptance of Western philosophical approaches to history – using these tools, the Japanese will never discover anything about themselves. Tosaka argues that Western philosophical approaches to history are characterized by a negligence of everydayness in favor of a metaphysical binding to an essential past – something he finds exemplified in Heidegger's 1927 work *Sein und Zeit*. Tosaka there finds Heidegger writing:

In its factual Being, any Dasein is as it already was, and it is 'what' it already was. It *is* its past, whether explicitly or not. And this is so not only in that its past is, as it were, pushing itself along 'behind' it, and that Dasein possesses what is past as a property which is still present-at-hand and which sometimes has after-effects upon it: Dasein 'is' its past in the way of *its* own Being, which, to put it roughly, 'historizes' out of its future on each occasion. (1962, p. 41)

Heidegger tends to value everydayness (*Alltäglichkeit*) somewhat negatively, associating it with the mediocrity of the great masses of the people,

the 'they' (*das Man*). Completely reminiscent of the anti-modernist stance of many Japanese philosophers of this period, Heidegger writes:

In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of Being of 'the Others', in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the 'they' is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as *they* shrink back; we find 'shocking' what *they* find shocking. The 'they', which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness. (1962, p. 164)

As Tosaka seems to understand Heidegger, one is able to return to an original primordially if one makes use of the possibility, always open to Dasein, to detach completely from all conventions associated with the 'they'. It is this apparent longing for a return to man's solitary source that Tosaka characterizes as theological, resembling that of the Buddhist monk who retreats from the hassle of the world in his monastery (Harootunian, 2000, p. 127). For this reason, he considers Heidegger not a philosopher but a theologian; what Tosaka aims to do is to put the philosophy, rather than the theology, of the everyday on the philosophical agenda.

Sharing the same horror of mass culture, Kuki found himself inspired by Heidegger to go and locate the primordially of Japanese being-in-the-world in the notion of *iki*. It is not without irony that, to the nationalistic thinkers of this period (Kuki certainly included), the 'they' were in fact the Westerners, precisely because the Japanese masses emulated Western behavior at an unprecedented scale. Equating the 'they' with Westerners was aggravated by the fact that Heidegger (at least initially) did not seem to be impressed with the Japanese, at all. As Pincus mentions in this regard, the '...apparent universality of *Dasein* (...) was belied by Heidegger's insistence that the problematic of *Dasein* enjoyed an exclusive relation with the German language and its linguistic-philosophical past.' (1991, p. 146) Heidegger, or so Pincus suggests, questioned whether the Japanese would

be able to appreciate the subtleties of a conceptual system that was decidedly Western, and as such beyond their grasp. It is therefore not entirely a surprise that, faced with the eurocentric approaches of their Western philosophical mentors, his Japanese students would hold on to the belief in their own privileged access to universal truth. For this, they could turn to Nishida's early philosophical exposition of the notion of 'pure experience', and find comfort in the idea that the Japanese way of experiencing the world was somehow more immediate, or non-dualistic, than that of others (Sharf, 1993, p. 35).

It is this trend of attempting to show Japanese superiority over other peoples that Tosaka lamented, since it further removed the Japanese philosophical project from what it had to be doing: address current issues, such as the fascism that was taking over the intellectual milieu. Attention to local problems of the here-and-now was sacrificed for an abstract universalism concerned with problems of global proportions. Tosaka found nationalistic intellectuals such as Kuki ill-equipped to conceptually deal with a war that ended up escalating quickly; at best, they could explain what was happening within their conceptual scheme of the world by arguing, as Tanabe eventually did in 1939, that '...the Japanese nation, with the emperor at its head, has the status of a divine, salvific presence in the world.' (Heisig, 199, p. 255) In other words, they considered it the duty of the Japanese people to export their spirit to those who lacked it, and found in this a justification of the war to subjugate the Asian peoples on the continent.

Tosaka, rather than dealing with the branches of the tree, retraced the problem back to its roots: Nishida and his appropriation of German idealism. In a 1932 newspaper article, he writes:

Nishida's philosophy, in a word, represents the most superb bourgeois philosophy of ideas in our country if not in the world, (...) a fact that perhaps everyone has already surmised (...). Though it has been able to treat matters that overstep the phenomenon of consciousness completely, it can only be called a phenomenology in the highest degree. (Tosaka, 1932, as cited in Heisig, 1994, p. 4)

In other words, Nishida had been more concerned with a phenomenology of a trans-historical subject than with concrete, material reality. Nishida turned inside to universalize the first-person perspective and lost himself in the lofty idealism of an eternal world beyond the dualism of the subject and the object, which meant he had no way to account for historical development. What Nishida needed to do was to try and develop his philosophy in such a way as to include an account of history and concrete social praxis – as it was, it could not meaningfully account for basic human action. Since this idealism was at the heart of the endeavors of the rest of the adherents to the Kyoto School, Tosaka deemed it necessary to reject its approach to philosophy as a whole.

### Tosaka's critique of the hermeneutic method itself

I now turn to the critique of hermeneutics itself as formulated in *Nihon Ideorogiron*. Tosaka discusses the development of hermeneutics in the West in part one (*nihon shugi no hihan to sono gensoku*, 'a critique of Japanism and its principles'), chapter one (*bunkengakuteki tetsugaku no bunseki*, 'an analysis of philological philosophy'), after having given an exposition on the relationship between liberalism and hermeneutics in the preface. Since his discussion of hermeneutics in *Nihon Ideorogiron* has not been translated, I make use of the Japanese original of this work – any translation given here is mine.<sup>10</sup>

In the preface Tosaka states that the fundamental characteristic of liberalism is its hermeneutic method. When Tosaka uses the word 'liberalism', he refers to a mode of thought typical of the cultured elite of his time – to those who were more interested in reading and writing literature than in actually dealing with the real world. For Tosaka, the Japanese form of liberalism was thus preoccupied with a substitute world of meaning produced through literary representation (effectively ignoring that the country and most of its bureaucrats were still under the spell of centuries of feudalism). This world of meaning could easily be manipulated, and flourished because no link to actual reality ever had to be established (Tosaka, 1977, pp. 21-23). The primary weapon of this cultured elite was a 'refined' (*seiren sareta*) version of hermeneutics, which Tosaka calls 'philologism'. Tosaka writes:

Philologism<sup>11</sup> [*bunkengaku shugi*] does not base itself on the real world, but solely on the etymological interpretation of literature. At its most extreme, it takes an arbitrary word from the national language, and tailors it for use as a philosophical concept. Literacism<sup>12</sup> [*bungaku shugi*] applied this mechanism to [literary] representations; philologism applies it to words. But if that were all there is to it, anybody would be able to see through the superficiality of this so-called philosophical method. However, if you apply this method to ancient texts, then as long as people have no clue what was actually happening in the particular historical period the text was produced in, it is possible to win some credibility. If you rely on this philologicistic interpretation (or rather: distortion [*kojitsuke*]) of ancient texts, you can draw a philologicistic interpretation out of history as well. The 'awareness of national history' [*kokushi no ninshiki*] of today's japanists [*nihon shugisha*] is completely based in this kind of method. (1977, pp. 24-25)

As Tosaka sees it, liberalism created the openness required for the circulation of a great many ideas. Liberalism was not so much itself a system of ideas, but rather a space able to accommodate every possible conceivable idea. It never really took much root in Japanese society, but mostly circulated and left its mark within elite cultural circles. Tosaka argues that it was the open space provided by liberalism (in combination with its philologicistic method) that eventually gave rise to religious absolutism. Liberalism had seemingly upset the old forms of rule, but had also failed to resolve the contradictions existing in society. Tosaka observed that religion was able to resolve these tensions, but could only do so at the ideal, abstract level. Catering to the cultural elite whose religious consciousness had been awakened by liberalism, the existing religions in Japan were reoriented to satisfy demands for solutions to all kinds of societal problems brought about by the introduction of liberalism to Japan. It was thus, Tosaka argues, that a pact between religious and political absolutism (the doctrine of the emperor as a living god) was born (1977, pp. 19-20). This implied that the cultural elite no longer concerned themselves with solving actual problems, but contended themselves with resolving contradictions at a level detached from reality, using religion as a platform. Tosaka claims that Japanese Buddhists

were able to reinterpret Buddhism in such a way that it could be seen as an expression of the Japanese spirit. Buddhists thus cooperated with the absolutist state in order to survive – a state that had tried to eradicate them only decades before.

Let me briefly explicate the significance of Tosaka's argument using more recent literature on the topic. Liberalism brought with it the demand (mostly through pressure from the international community) for the freedom of religion. The Western notion of religion, however, did not exist in Japan at the time liberalism was introduced. This is attested to by the fact that the word religion, *shūkyō*, was, like the word for philosophy, introduced at the end of the nineteenth century (Krämer, 2013, p. 90). The sudden awareness of the existence of 'religious systems' that could in principle be separated from one another could be argued to have been an indirect cause of the Meiji government's policy of *shinbutsu bunri*<sup>13</sup> (separating Buddhism from Shinto, implemented immediately in 1868), which resulted in the anti-Buddhist violence known as *haibutsu kishaku*.<sup>14</sup> As Kuroda Toshio demonstrates in his 1981 article *Shinto in the History of Japanese Religion*, the Meiji government attempted to eradicate Buddhism (since it was now considered a foreign religion, whereas before it had not been seen as a religion different from Shinto) from its lands and tout Shinto as a way of life most closely aligned with the innate spirituality of the Japanese. The Japanese went as far as to not qualify Shinto a 'religion' in the Meiji constitution (Kuroda, 1981). Faced with this threat of annihilation, Japanese Buddhists had no strategy left to them but to play into the hands of state ideology. As Robert Sharf argues in his 1993 article *The Zen of Japanese Nationalism*, this is the true face of the popular Zen we know in the West: a nationalistic reinterpretation of original Zen Buddhism in order to safeguard it from eradication by the Meiji government. Tosaka's argument is that all of these japanistic reinterpretations were only possible (and necessary) because of the availability of the hermeneutic (or philologicistic) method that, together with religious consciousness, came drifting along with the transmission of liberalism to Japan.

However, the various applications of the hermeneutic method by the Japanese intellectuals of his time formed only half of Tosaka's problem. Hermeneutics itself, Tosaka argues, is unable to deal with actual prob-



lems because it is fundamentally oriented towards the past – even when it pretends to be solely concerned with the present. He shows this by recounting the historical development of hermeneutics. Tosaka begins this exposition on the history of the hermeneutic method by writing that the primary aim of philology is the decoding of ancient texts. However, it is an important trait of philology that it generally extends its range to also concern itself with decoding present-day texts and various other cultural expressions – it tends to liberate itself from merely having to deal with language and texts from the past. Moreover, the goal of philology is not merely to understand words and expressions, but rather the thought and concepts these words and expressions contain. In order to do so, the philologist requires the tool of interpretation. Understanding (*rikai*; *Verstehen*) always occurs by means of interpretation. Tosaka proposes that the philosophical kernel of philology lies in hermeneutics, or the science of interpretation. This in turn means that philology's range is, from its inception, potentially not limited to only (historical) documents, because it involves the characteristically human process of understanding (required to be able to interpret at all) and cannot be separated from this. Inevitably, then, philology tends to not simply limit itself to the world of language, but to become purely philosophical in nature (Tosaka, 1977, pp. 37-41).

The one who would first contribute to this turn to 'philosophical philology' (*tetsugakuteki bunkengaku*) is Schleiermacher. Tosaka thinks it is crucial to realize that before hermeneutics reached Schleiermacher, it had already passed through a phase in which it had been primarily used by protestants, who applied the method to the Bible, and perfected it as a science. The one who brought philosophy and philology closely together, Schleiermacher, was himself also a protestant (Tosaka, 1977, pp. 41-42). Regarding this, Tosaka writes:

But the fact that Schleiermacher's philology had philosophical depth, could at the same time only mean that it had theological depth (in fact, Schleiermacher was a far better theologian than philosopher). His theology or philosophy was substantiated by his yearning for the infinite. This yearning for the infinite (...) developed into a nostalgic longing for bygone worlds, characteristic of German Romanticism.

(...) We must pay heed to the fact that philology met philosophy, or became philosophical, at a time when hermeneutics was characterized by nostalgic and idealistic romanticism. (1977, pp. 42-43)

Although Schleiermacher's philology had not yet become purely philosophical, Tosaka wants to point out that Schleiermacher's most problematic contribution to a philosophical philology lay in his idealism and longing for bygone historical worlds. Here I remind the reader that it had been Von Koeber who had first introduced the major figures that made up the Kyoto School to the works of Schleiermacher. Von Koeber's approach to hermeneutics, too, had clearly been influenced by German Romantic thought. His students had indeed resorted to an idealized version of history to reconstruct the essence of Japanese being with. The reason why Schleiermacher's philology is not yet fully philosophical is that his hermeneutics still has a strong connection to textual sources. At the end of the nineteenth century, it would be Dilthey that did away with this connection. Concerning Dilthey's *Lebensphilosophie*, Tosaka writes:

Our lived experience [*seikatsu*; *Erlebnis*] objectively expresses itself in history. These expressions are the true spirit [*seishin*; *Geist*], and by understanding this spirit we can first begin to know about our own lived experience – precisely the interpretation of expression is the understanding of life. (1977, p. 44)

In other words, hermeneutics here becomes the science that is required to understand human life. By understanding the history of expression, we can understand ourselves in the present. It is no longer a matter of understanding past texts; with Dilthey, the domain of hermeneutics is expanded to include all forms of human expression.

Since understanding historical expression is mainly done through texts (simply because the past does not come to us in many other forms), Dilthey's approach still remains somewhat faithful to philology's original aim. Where Schleiermacher's hermeneutics still has a connection to texts, and where Dilthey's has one to history, it is finally in Heidegger that hermeneutics becomes a matter of pure philosophical speculation (Tosaka, 1977, pp. 44-45). Heidegger inherits the phenomenological approach of

Edmund Husserl – an approach which is the exact opposite of philology. The problem with Heidegger's synthesis of hermeneutics and phenomenology is that the latter is fundamentally ahistorical. Tosaka writes:

The meaning of phenomena lies in the fact that they can ever only be addressed as a problem by considering their outward appearance. That is to say, it is meaningless to address that which lies beyond the phenomena when all we have is their surface appearance. (...) If we suppose that behind the things, in their depth, lies the expression of the spirit, and hermeneutics and philology are methods that obtain from behind the things their meaning, then we have to conclude that these methods are from the beginning methods that are unfit to deal with these things we call phenomena. This is because there is no way to measure the depth<sup>15</sup> of a surface. (1977, pp. 46-47)

Regardless of this, Heidegger tries to formulate a phenomenology that is hermeneutical. But in doing so, he severs the former ties hermeneutics had to texts and history, and raises it to the level of pure philosophy. A hermeneutics that is neither textual nor historical, however, can be nothing but a caricature of itself. Conversely, a philosophy that applies this type of hermeneutics cannot be scientific (Tosaka, 1977, p. 48). Regardless of what Heidegger wants hermeneutics to do, Tosaka thinks hermeneutics cannot be used to analyze actuality. Hermeneutics is always tied to texts (which have already been written) and history (which has already passed), meaning it can never tell us anything about the here-and-now. Tosaka's harsh verdict is that Heidegger's caricature of hermeneutics reduces philosophy to a mere play with words (that are without a history or textual basis) which only serves to entertain, in both the case of Germany and Japan, an educated intelligentsia that is losing itself to a fantasy world shaped by fascism.

To Tosaka, the japanistic thought of Heidegger's students Kuki and Watsuji is not simply the result of a local, Japanese problem, but is essentially a (theological) flight from reality that was inherited with the introduction of liberalism and its method – hermeneutics – to Japan. In a sense, their use of hermeneutics is actually a perfectly proper one – so long as we realize that they, as students of Heidegger, employ his carica-

tural version of hermeneutics, or what Tosaka refers to as 'philologism'. According to Tosaka, a return to pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics does not solve anything, since hermeneutics, even when it pretends to deal with the here-and-now, still fundamentally resorts to the past (imagined, idealized, or otherwise) in order to obtain any sort of meaning. Tosaka deems hermeneutics completely unable to assist us in solving problems facing us at this moment, since it is not concerned with the present in any way (but only concerns itself with what has already been done). It therefore belongs to those who can afford to remain distant from the world, and in fact do so by safely remaining inside of the archives and universities. The moment philologism comes to shape political ideology, the fantasies of detached intelligentsia come to overrule common sense. According to Tosaka, this is precisely where Japan went wrong.

### An evaluation of Tosaka's critique of hermeneutics

Tosaka's critique of hermeneutics forms an important part of his staunch opposition to Kyoto School philosophy. Tosaka ridicules Kyoto School philosophers for using Western methods (i.e. hermeneutics) to recover the Japanese spirit from an idealized past – an undertaking that according to him is completely meaningless, but dangerous nonetheless, since it creates a pseudo-world of meaning easily manipulated by those in power. Two related questions are in order here: is Tosaka's characterization of hermeneutics, namely as a method that is fundamentally welded to the past, fair? If it is not, what consequences does this have for his criticism of Kyoto School thought?

Hermeneutics has moved beyond Tosaka. It is unfortunate that Tosaka died in 1945; had he lived to see the further development of philosophy in the post-war years, he would have undoubtedly had to reconsider his evaluation of hermeneutics upon reading Hans-Georg Gadamer's 1960 work *Wahrheit und Methode*. It is important to realize that the philosophers Tosaka discusses (from Schleiermacher to Dilthey) all consider hermeneutics to be a method that can first and foremost be used to recover meaning. Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutics is, however, radically different. Not the reconstruction of past meaning, but the construction of

novel contexts of meaning is what constitutes hermeneutical understanding. While Tosaka, having a traditional understanding of hermeneutics, deems the endeavors of the Kyoto School to recover the Japanese spirit completely meaningless, Gadamer would argue the exact opposite. This is to say that, to Gadamer, tradition is not something which has its kernel in some distant past; it is rather a process, a pendulum that constantly swings between past and present. Tradition is a product of both the past and the present, and is *meaningful* (i.e. can be understood) because of this. In Gadamer, then, hermeneutics reaches a stage at which it is undeniably connected to the present. His hermeneutics arguably forms a counterexample to Tosaka's claim that hermeneutics is fundamentally oriented towards the past. Hermeneutics does not only concern that which has already been done – it is rather constantly happening and no final understanding can ever be obtained. With Gadamer, we can see how the Japanese spirit is not recovered from, and does not merely dwell in, some literary pseudo-world constituted by past texts, but is in fact, as an idea, a concrete part of practical attempts at reorienting Japanese identity in the here-and-now. Tosaka's strict separation of the historical world from a pseudo-world of meaning prevents him from seeing the two are strongly connected. Gadamer's hermeneutics could supply Tosaka precisely with the kind of method he needs to understand and interpret daily customs, not only in relation to history as it unfolds in the minimal repetition of the everyday, but also in connection to long-term historical development. That Tosaka is indeed in need of such a method is quite aptly pointed out by Harry Harootunian, who writes: 'However much Tosaka condemned the contemporary practice of hermeneutics (especially of his older teacher Nishida Kitarō) as a bourgeois philosophy, his own approach to the modern experience was just as philosophic and interpretative' (2000, xviii).

Tosaka falls victim to a view of history that is too one-sided. He fails to see how past and present, self and other, ideal and material, the elite and the masses, are constantly intertwined. He strictly separates what is Western from what is Japanese, and from this position claims that all the Kyoto School philosophers have done is, in fact, thoroughly Western. This, I would be inclined to argue, robs the Japanese of any sort of agency. He seems to be caught precisely in the kind of thinking that caused the Meiji government to pursue its policy of *shinbutsu bunri* (separating

Shinto from Buddhism). In doing so, it failed to see that after more than a millennium, Buddhism was no longer merely a 'foreign religion', but had in fact become an essential part of Japanese identity. This is because, as Gadamer would point out, the introduction of Buddhism involved swinging between the known and the unknown to such an extent that already after two hundred years (but arguably ever since it first reached to Japan) it had, in the works of such prominent monks as Kūkai and Saichō, become undeniably Japanese. Applying this insight to Tosaka's evaluation of Kyoto School philosophy, it becomes possible to see how Japanese intellectuals actively participated in the formulation of a novel kind of philosophy, one that cleared the way for, as Gadamer would call it, a fusion of horizons. This novel kind of philosophy formed a context of meaning that allowed the Japanese philosophers to engage with an intellectual tradition foreign to them. In this important sense, the Kyoto School philosophers did not just emulate, and were not mere passive recipients of, Western philosophy and its methods of inquiry, as Tosaka would have us believe.

## Conclusion

Although we need to remain wary of the extent to which Tosaka's own methodological orientation limits a fair assessment of the Kyoto School's achievements, he does expose a fundamental problem at the heart of its endeavors. Quite a few Kyoto School intellectuals were preoccupied with a dubious use of the hermeneutic method in order to uncover concepts from an idealized past that were supposed to express eternal characteristics of the Japanese spirit. It is therefore important to be vigilant of the concepts that the Kyoto School philosophers developed using this method. Tosaka's greatest contribution may have been that he offers us a way in which to evaluate these concepts critically, namely by investigating to what extent they are the product of what he calls 'philologism'.

The debate on Nishida's involvement with fascism is still on-going, but it is clear that Nishida's success inspired many to use philologistic methods. Nishida's central notion from his early works, *junsui keiken*, could all too easily be adopted for building a case for the privileged access of the Japanese to noumenal reality, as Suzuki and Watsuji did. Concepts

developed from such hollow claims (as quite a few Kyoto School thinkers were inclined to) should have no place in the philosophical vocabulary of the West, and should hardly deserve any attention from comparative philosophers – at best, they should serve as historical curiosities. At the same time, however, the debate on Nishida's philosophy is far from over. Nishida may have inspired a problematic following, but he himself seems to have attempted to combat the militarism of his time on many occasions. Any reevaluation of the Kyoto School that starts from Nishida's philosophy should address Tosaka's challenge head on, and attempt to show that Nishida's motivations and methodology were different from what Tosaka attributes to him. This may also be a way of revitalizing a current of thought that has met with a lot of criticism both in the country where it originated, and abroad. With Tosaka, any evaluation of the Kyoto School should not end, but begin.

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### Editorial note

Since this essay was written by a member of the editorial board of the Erasmus Student Journal of Philosophy, it was subject to a more extensive review procedure. For more information, see <http://www.eur.nl/fw/english/esjp/submissions>.

### Notes

1. By convention, Japanese names are written with the family name coming first. I will do so in all cases except that of D.T. Suzuki.
2. 哲学, made up of the characters for 'wisdom' and 'study'.
3. 古事記, 'record of ancient matters'.
4. 日本書紀, 'chronicle of Japan'.
5. The characters for 'Meiji', 明治, are suggestive of this, literally meaning 'enlightened rule'.
6. 日本古代文化, 'ancient Japanese culture'.
7. 万葉集, literally 'collection of ten thousands leaves', believed to have been compiled sometime after 759 CE.
8. 「いき」の構造, translated as *The Structure of Iki*.
9. 日本イデオロギー論, 'essay on Japanese ideology'.
10. I found myself aided by the brief summary of Tosaka's critique of hermeneutics provided by Leslie Pincus in his 1996 book *Authenticating Culture in Imperial Japan: Kuki Shūzō and the Rise of National Aesthetics*, pp. 164-165. Since I cover the same material in more detail, I do not cite his work, but knowing the general direction into which Tosaka is headed made him significantly easier to translate.
11. The Japanese word used here, *bunkengaku shugi* (文献学主義), has no equivalent in English, since it appears to be neologism invented by Tosaka. In Japanese, adding *-shugi* to a term implies its doctrinary variant. For example, capitalism is *shihon shugi* (資本主義) and liberalism is *jiyū shugi* (自由主義). Since *bunkengaku* means philology, *bunkengaku shugi* could be (perhaps rather clumsily) translated as philologism.
12. See footnote 11. In this case, the Japanese original is *bungaku shugi* (文学主義). *Bungaku* means literature.
13. 神仏分離, 'separate Shinto from Buddhism'.



14. 廃仏毀釈, 'abolish Buddhism, destroy the teachings of Sākyamuni'. Sākyamuni is the name of the historical Buddha.
15. The word used here is *atsusa* (厚さ) which literally translates to 'thickness'.

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