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Revisiting *Rude Awakenings*

The Dangerous (?) Thought of the Kyoto School

The international controversy concerning the wartime political thought of the Kyoto School is as alive today as ever, seventy some years after the end of the war. This article first examines some assumptions operating in the background of recent critical literature that reads certain texts primarily through the lens of "the war," without clarifying which war is meant, which "Kyoto School," and which of its writings. Next, it reads "Overcoming Modernity" not through the lens of Japan's war but rather by placing two of its themes in a current global context: the themes of secularism in "modernity" and of "machine civilization." Finally, it addresses the question, what can we learn now from the political (mis)adventures of wartime Kyoto School? It reads the notorious *Chūōkōron* symposium in the context of geopolitics both at the time and today. The symposiasts alter the meaning of war in a way that explains aspects of warfare today, particularly its apparent endlessness. And their claims of Japanese exceptionalism and global mission find a current parallel in U.S. claims today that rationalize an American empire the media would rather keep hidden. The controversy proves relevant both for discerning our responsibilities as scholars and for understanding current global politics and their historical connection to the past.

KEYWORDS: Pacific War—Kyoto School—Overcoming Modernity—secularism—machine civilization—*Chūōkōron* symposium—American Empire

The international controversy concerning the wartime political thought of the Kyoto School is as alive today, seventy some years after the end of the war, as it ever was. If anything has become quite clear since the 1994 symposium, "Zen, the Kyoto School, and the Question of Nationalism," it is that, in the interim, the controversy over the question has stirred up on an even more massive scale. The issues it raises are perhaps as more relevant than ever—relevant for discerning the responsibilities of scholars and for understanding current global politics and their historical connection to the past. And the past that has not passed is only one side of the controversy.

With an eye on the future, a few commentators, like Takeuchi Yoshimi in 1959 and Kosaka Kunitsugu in 2001, attempted neither to settle the controversy nor to defend one or another judgment about it; instead they urged further questioning. When Takeuchi revived the controversy in Japan in 1959, he called for continuing discussion of its issues "so as to better understand this vital notion of resistance (抵抗) in all its political and philosophical implications." In 2001 and 2018, Kosaka wrote of the "need to seriously reengage and reexamine the philosophy of the Kyoto School" on a "more universal cultural basis than... the political ideology" of those involved in the postwar debate.[1] These challenges are far more than what I can manage to undertake in this short essay, and they are not even in the sight of many who have discussed the controversy. What I offer here is not a mollifying overview of the relevant scholarship, much less an attempt to settle the controversy. Rather I want to highlight some assumptions often lurking in the background of recent critical literature, and then point out some issues often overlooked. And, finally, I want to raise yet another question: what do

1. Takeuchi's description is a paraphrase by his translator: Calichman 2008, xiv; Kosaka 2001, 308 (2018, 251).

we have to learn today from the political (mis)adventures of wartime Kyoto School philosophers?

The controversy and its presuppositions

As soon as we look into the controversy, however, it splits fractal-like into a number of distinct questions that become evident once we examine the assumptions. Which controversy? Which war? Which Kyoto School figures? Which writings? Let me briefly address these questions one at a time.

Which controversy? To put it in a nutshell and, for the time being, to ignore details and nuances, the controversy involves professors associated with the Kyoto School who wrote about the Japanese nation, its emperor, and the war. What they wrote appears to many readers to endorse Japanese imperialism toward East Asian nations and to sanction imperial tyranny within Japan. It seems to offer a rationale for the war. Needless to say, the war ended with Japan's defeat and the destruction of cities and millions upon millions of lives. All postwar commentators on the controversy agree that the war was devastating; most assume that it was politically misguided and morally wrong. The words of a character in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, *An Artist of the Floating World*, capture the sentiment of many:

> Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us. Afraid to show themselves for what they are, to admit their responsibility.[2]

And in the minds of many, Kyoto School philosophers appear among this group of culprits, for they apparently offered a rationale for this war and so seem complicit in foolhardy ideologies with devastating consequences; indeed, they seem responsible for moral evil. This is the most blatant form of the controversy. For some scholars and laypeople alike, it continues to mark Kyoto School figures as fascists, despite cogent arguments to the contrary. I have personally encountered young people in Japan who simply refuse to read Nishitani Keiji, for example, because they associate him with emperor-worshipping fascists responsible for a wrongful and devastating war.

Yet there is wide disagreement about the meaning of what these Kyoto

2. Ishiguro 1986, 58.

School figures wrote and what their stances toward the war were, and toward the nation and its emperor. Those who do read the controversial texts are bound to notice that what is written goes far beyond the topics of war, nation, and imperial reign. The texts raise far-ranging questions about the place of Japan in a global world, the historical nature of a world of interlinked nations, the role of tradition and the need to modernize, the place of science and of religion in the modern world, the nature of modernity and how or whether to overcome it. These topics and their presuppositions were controversial *within* the Kyoto School as well as among postwar commentators, and the internecine diversity and disagreement deserve more attention than has been given so far. To be sure, many critical historians have argued about the Kyoto School stance toward modernity and the spiritual, cultural and national identifications of Japan, in addition to the controversy about their wartime complicity. Yet those issues play second fiddle to the question of wartime responsibility. I am convinced that little attention would be paid to Kyoto School political philosophy were it not for *that* question, *that* controversy. For the most part, critical postwar commentators implicate the Kyoto School in the construction of an imaginary Japanese spirit and Japanese unity that enabled public support for the war. In contrast, relatively few historians and philosophers interpret the Kyoto School as resisting the war, or at least attempting to mitigate the aggressive policies of the Japanese army, as opposed to the more circumspect navy. I will discuss this secondary controversy later. For better or worse, *the* overarching controversy, the one that has assumed the role of a leitmotif if not always the primary focus in the postwar literature, has been the question of war responsibility. I hasten to add that we fail to do justice to Kyoto School political writings if we refuse to take up, in a context outside the question of the war, certain controversial themes they discuss.

But just what war are we talking about? That question, too, does not have a simple answer. The near occasion of the two symposia that are at the heart of the controversy was Japan's Declaration of War on the United States and Britain on December 8, 1941, after coordinated attacks on the Hawaii Islands (as Roosevelt called it then at the time, not on "Pearl Harbor") and on several British and U.S. colonies in East Asia. That day, memorialized in America as "a date which will live in infamy," was celebrated as a "glorious day" by many intellectuals in Japan. Of course, the war did not sud-

denly begin then. As Takeuchi Yoshimi notes, "its beginnings can be traced back to 1937," the year of the "China Incident' as it was called in Japan, "and even to 1931," with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria.[3] But the 1941 date also complicates the identity of the war relevant to our discussion, for this new stage, generally known as the Pacific War, erased any remaining resistance among most intellectuals to the war against China—except for the communists and a few absolute pacifists; instead it reinforced their sense of patriotism and resistance to the West.[4] In effect, "the war" is equivocal. For us today the war in question means Japan's aggressive military engagements since 1931, but for Kyoto School philosophers it meant the *Greater East Asia War* (大東亜戦争) declared in 1941 and fought primarily against Western imperialism, although it retrospectively included the continuing war with China.[5] The allusions to "the war" must be understood with that difference in mind. For them, the war was waged to liberate East Asian nations from Western imperialism and colonialism. For critics, the war embodied Japan's imperialism and colonization of other nations, to which many Kyoto School figures seemed blind.

But which Kyoto School figures? What Kyoto School? Three professors who participated in a multi-disciplinary symposium on overcoming modernity in 1942 were later identified as Kyoto School affiliates by postwar commentators, but not as such by the other participants. These three were the philosophers Nishtani Keiji and Shimomura Toratarō, and the historian Suzuki Shigetaka. In fact, the participants in that symposium had their own ways of grouping one another. At one point, the literary scholar Kobayashi Hideo turned to Nishitani and complained that his contribution was extremely difficult to understand. Kobayashi affiliated Nishitani with

3. Takeuchi 1959, 122.

4. Ibid., 120, 122. One nearly forgotten example of early resistance is the case of the critic Nakai Masakazu 中井正一 (1900–1952), who edited the "subversive" journal *World Culture* (世界文化) and was active in an anti-war, anti-fascist people's front movement. He was arrested in 1937 for violating the Peace Preservation Law and imprisoned for two years. Thanks to Uehara Mayuko for this information.

5. The editors of the January 1942 issue of *Chūōkōron* wrote, "The Greater East Asian War broke out when the proofs of this issue were being finished" (cited in Takeuchi 1959, 131). But the four participants in those discussions place the beginning of that war with the "China Incident" of 1937 and trace its origins even further back to Japan's military engagements in Manchuria in 1931. See for example CH, 104.

Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko, the Catholic theologian who participated, and said their essays "lack the sensuality of the Japanese people's language." The philosophers should write in a "style that can be achieved only by Japanese people." If they are nonchalant about this, "Japanese philosophy will never truly be reborn as Japanese philosophy." Nishitani responded sympathetically but noted that philosophy, as practiced in Japan, was written under the sway of Western philosophy and in its specialized language. "It is extremely difficult for us to express our thoughts through only the Japanese words of the past."[6] The nuclear physicist Kikuchi Seishi offered yet another constellation. In contrast to Kobayashi's alignment, Kikuchi shared the Catholic theologian's misgivings about Nishitani's "logic of nothingness," which really amounted to no logic at all but rather the path of Nishitani's own leap, through his Zen practice, into "a world that exists beyond all philosophy and science, where there is neither thought nor discernment."[7] Yet Kikuchi for his part found value in such a leap and thought it necessary to move beyond the Western notion of self, beyond the individualism and selfishness infecting his countrymen, to "seriously consider the traditional Oriental notion of 'self-effacement' (私の滅却)."[8] Kikuchi then cited Zen master Bankei's notion of the Unborn in the only reference to Zen we find in the symposium. But Kikuchi is not counted among the Kyoto School, nor do postwar commentators account for his and the theologian's perspectives, presumably because they do not conform to the identities and unities that commentators conjure up.

Joining Nishitani and Suzuki Shigetaka in a second symposium were the two philosophers Kōsaka Masaaki and Kōyama Iwao. These four engaged in intense discussions more focused and quite different in tone than the Overcoming Modernity meeting. The first session took place in Kyoto two weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor that they did not foresee. Two other sessions followed, in March and in November of 1942, and so this smaller symposium began before and ended after the Overcoming Modernity discussions. Like them, the results were published serially in a journal and then

6. Calichman 2008, 196. Maraldo (2017, 57–99) documents the influence of Western philosophical terminology on academic Japanese philosophy.

7. Calichman 2008, 134.

8. Ibid., 134–5; Kawakami and Takeuchi 1979, 149. Calichman translates the relevant term as "self-extinction."

as a book. In 1943, then, we see two books published, with 15,000 copies of one printed in the first edition and 6000 copies of the other, with both eventually reaching 46 editions.[9] These books, so eagerly received at the time by the Japanese public, after the war became texts of scorn that for many critics and laypeople marked the identity of the Kyoto School. Indeed, in Japan it became common to bind together the name of the Kyoto School and the names of the two symposia—the one called "Overcoming Modernity" and the other, named simply for its publisher, the "*Chūōkōron* Symposium." On the basis of that reputation, the four who partook in the *Chūōkōron* discussion became derisively known as the "Four Heavenly Kings of the Kyoto School" (京都学派四天王).[10] And this coupling of philosophers and symposia has tended to overlook what the other participants in Overcoming Modernity had to say, particularly about themes not related to the war that might be relevant today.[11] The coupling of names also nurtures ignorance of other, much more voluminous writings by the philosophers. If the war served as the leitmotif for *the* controversy, the war-related remarks by so-called Kyoto School philosophers supplied grist for the mill.

Often the postwar commentators carefully select that grist. A common practice among critical readers has been to extract and quote the more objectionable statements, and read them through the lens of Japan's wrongful war and eventual defeat. When discrepancies appear between a reading and other statements in the text, the apparent contradiction is considered inconsequential. An example relates to Nishitani's remarks about founding

9. Takeuchi 1959, 104.

10. Sugawara 2018 is one of the latest books that focus on the controversy in its treatment of Nishitani and other Kyoto School symposia participants, repeating the epithet the "Four Heavenly Kings of the Kyoto School."

11. This tendency is evident not only in the widely varying interpretations of the Overcoming Modernity symposium by Takeuchi 1959, Hiromatsu 1989, Karatani et al. 1989, and Karatani 1994, but also in renewed investigations of its current relevance, in Irmela Hijiya Kirschnereit, ed., *Überwindung der Moderne? Japan am Ende des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999); Koyasu Nobukuni 子安 宣邦, 『近代の「超克」とは何か』[What is "Overcoming Modernity"?] (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2008); Sakai Naoki 酒井 直樹, 『「近代の超克」と京都学派：近代性・帝国・普遍性』["Overcoming Modernity" and the Kyoto School: Modernity, Empire, Universality] (Tokyo: Ibunsha, 2010); Sugawara Jun 管原潤, 『「近代の超克」再考』[Another Look at "Overcoming Modernity"] (Kyoto: Kōyō Dhobō, 2011); and Suzuki Sadami 鈴木 貞美, 『「近代の超克」：その戦前・戦中・戦後』[Overcoming Modernity, Before, During and After the War] (Tokyo: Sakuhinsha, 2015).

a new world-order and constructing Greater East Asia, and his "apparent" caution against colonialism. In *Overcoming Modernity* Nishitani states that

> the problems that our nation is now facing are those of founding a new world-order and constructing Greater East Asia. The concentration of the state's aggregate force and above all a powerful moral energy are now required in order to realize these problems. However, the construction of Greater East Asia must of course not mean for our nation the acquisition of colonies, just as the founding of a new world order must be a just one… If the globality of Japan's spirit that underlies this project [of establishing Japan's worldview] stops merely at something like the nation's direct self-expansion… it will be unable to truly ground its worldview.[12]

Immediately before this last quoted statement, Nishitani cites the now notorious slogan "the whole world under one roof" (八紘一宇), calling it "the doctrine of historical and indeed world-historical reality." But the translator, Richard Calichman, considers Nishitani's warning against colonialism as merely "apparent," and he begs the question in assuming that Nishitani's view is imperialist: "a close reading" reveals that Nishitani's "support of both Japanese nationalism *and imperialism* is in fact fully informed by his universalism."[13] It is, indeed, easy to identify Nishitani's universalism in his invocation of the notorious slogan and his promotion of globality (世界性). His nationalism is similarly evident in taking that slogan as "our national doctrine" and in advocating Japan's special mission to lead all Asia to confront Anglo-Saxon domination. But Nishitani explicitly warns against both selfish individualism and national colonialism no less than three times. A "close reading" in fact suggests that, if Nishitani advocates any sense of imperialism at all, it is an anti-colonial imperialism. That stance could be "apparent" and disingenuous only in the view of a post-war, retrospective judgment that, without nuance, finds the Japanese nation an egregious aggressor and obvious colonizer.

I do not wish to underestimate the offense that people take upon reading Nishitani invoke slogans like "the whole world under one roof," nor do I want to whitewash the problems with many of Nishitani's statements in the two symposia. In reading them we cannot help but project back from

12. Calichman 2008, 59–60, 62.
13. Ibid., 34. My emphasis.

a postwar position and expect from the offender some foresight as to what was about to happen, or at least some acknowledgment of what was happening globally at the time. How to read statements in the context of the severe "thought control" imposed by those in power at that time poses a major hermeneutical challenge for us today. I do wish to discourage the practice of identifying the philosopher in question with one or two controversial texts and reading those texts through the lens of a few selected remarks that are most offensive today. This is a sort of *refractive reading* that bends textual meanings towards the reader's bias. I recognize that many criticisms are by no means exhausted by such refractive readings, and we can learn from them even when they occur. Nevertheless, it is often only because of the most offending texts that critical historians pay any attention at all to other politically related writings by Kyoto School philosophers.

But exactly which "Kyoto School" writings have been politically controversial? In addition to the texts of the two symposia, a number of books and articles would appear to be natural candidates; surprisingly few play a role in postwar critiques. A few examples may serve to illustrate how certain assumptions about "the war" continue to frame the controversy and to leave other questions by the wayside. Ignored by almost all postwar critics are Kōsaka's 1937 book, *The Historical World* (歴史的世界) and his essay in the same year on "The Hermeneutical Structure of the Way," which one reader interprets as resisting the "narrow standpoint of the 'imperial way' to which [the Way of Dao as well as Buddhist and Shinto traditions were] being reduced at the time."[14] Relatively ignored is Kōyama Iwao's *Philosophy of World History* (世界史の哲学, 1942).[15] Nishitani's overtly political *View of the World, View of the Nation* (世界観と国家観, 1941) was widely read in the early 1940s but receives scant attention in critical literature. His brief essay, "The Duty to Criticize and the Problem of Fascism," published in 1949, seems largely ignored, as do two short pieces in 1952 on the issues of

14. Kōsaka Shirō, in JPSB: 708. Another exception is the PhD dissertation of Thomas Parry Rhydwen, "The Kyoto School and Confucianism: A Confucian Reading of the Philosophy of History and Political Thought of Masaaki Kōsaka" (National University of Ireland, Cork, 2016).

15. To name some exceptions, one prominent critic of *Overcoming Modernity*, HIROMATSU (1989, 79) reads Kōyama's work as indicating how the symposia rationalized the Great Asian War ideology. KIMOTO 2009 concurs. SUGAWARA 2009 disputes that reading.

national self-defense.[16] In the postwar essay on fascism, Nishitani intends to turn the tables on leftist critics by exhorting them to recognize and uproot the causes of fascism within the nation, instead of regarding it as a problem of the past. Nishitani's *Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (『ニヒリズム』, 1949), argues that nihilism affects people on a national as well as individual scale, but that work has rarely garnered comment from politically-minded critics, although at least one has made some tendentious connections.[17]

The question of which writings have been subjected to political critique is more complicated in the case of some other philosophers identified as Kyoto School thinkers. The four philosophers and one historian retrospectively identified so far as Kyoto School figures had all studied with two outstanding teachers, Nishida Kitarō and Tanabe Hajime, so-called founders of the School. Which other figures belong to the School is a controversy of its own and depends in part on how the classifier regards the political stance of the person in question, as we have seen. For example, some commentators include, but others exclude, Tosaka Jun who first named the School and became a trenchant Marxist critic of his teachers, Nishida and Tanabe, and of Japanese ideology, before he was imprisoned. Miki Kiyoshi is similarly a significant if borderline figure. He was first drawn to Marxism and then disillusioned with it in the 1920s and early 190s, and, for reasons that remain controversial, in 1937 joined a government think-tank, the Shōwa Research Association, where he promoted a philosophy of cooperatism (共同主義) among Asian nations that was easily coopted by militarists as an imperialist "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere." Like Tosaka, Miki died in prison.

Nishida's political philosophy has been thoroughly investigated by intel-

16. I discuss these writings in Maraldo 1994.

17. Rieu 2015 reads the entire work, and not only its chapter on Japan, as an extension of the "overcoming modernity" project of 1942, that is, as equating nihilism with Americanism and Westernization, and nihility with Japan's way out of nihilism "to rediscover and restore the *spirit*, the trans-historical essence of Japan, to further purify this *spirit*." "Clearly," Rieu concludes, "Nishitani did not learn much from the war." In contrast, Graham Parkes, the translator of that work, reads the chapter "The Meaning of Nihilism for Japan" in the context of Nietzsche's and Karl Löwith's writings and interprets it as implying that "an outbreak of nationalism is a sure sign that the project of letting nihilism overcome itself has failed, that the experiential inquiry into the self has not gone far enough." Nishitani 1949, xxv.

lectual historians and philosophers both critical and sympathetic, and has received renewed critique beyond my purview here.[18] But Nishida often appears somewhat sidelined in the controversy, probably because of his ambiguous position toward the Japanese imperial state and the fact that he did not participate in the two symposia at the heart of the controversy. The rift between him and Tanabe from the early 1930s on is well known and sufficiently explained; with one or two exceptions, it did not concern their stance toward the war or the place of Japan in the world.[19] In fact, despite their philosophical disagreements, a letter from Tanabe in 1945 broke the silence between them, and in May and June of that year they together pursued an idea that might have brought an end to the war.[20] It should not be forgotten that they, like all the philosophers I have mentioned, communicated and argued with a large number of intellectuals and a few public officials, and did not belong to some "school," as if that were an exclusive club of adherents professing loyalty to someone or some doctrine. Indeed, if a consistent stance toward the war or some uniform political philosophy were

18. MARALDO 2006 summarizes some appraisals. MARALDO 2017, 117–19 shows the controversy has been one way to frame Nishida's philosophy, and pages 256–61 discuss the ambiguities in Nishida's proposal that the Imperial House functioned as Japan's center. STEFFENSEN 2018 offers a reappraisal of Nishida and the Kyoto School via a rectification of its name in light of its historical origins prior to postwar distortions. Elizabeth McManaman Tyler reassesses Nishida's wartime writings, and his regret over their effect, by considering them in light of his later writings on the religious mind: "Nishida's Bow: Evaluating Nishida's Wartime Actions," *Continental and Comparative Philosophy* 11.1 (March 2019), 19–33.

19. HEISIG 2015, 243–60 gives one succinct account, and 252 mentions Nishida's reputed reaction to some statements in Tanabe's "Logic of National Existence" (1939): "This Tanabe's stuff is completely fascist!"

20. Tanabe's proposed, with Nishida's backing, that the emperor "publicly renounce all possessions associated with his position and return them to the Japanese people" (as paraphrased by HEISIG 2015, 320–1, first published in HEISIG & MARALDO 1994, 273–4, referring to Tanabe's letter to Nishida cited in ŌSHIMA 1980, 3–4). To my mind, this step, although not an abdication, would effectively have dethroned the emperor in a way that met the allied demand for Japan's "unconditional" surrender at the time. As it turned out, the eventual surrender accepted by the Allied powers did not require abdication, and the emperor retained his position. Ironically, by the time Tanabe's idea wound its way to people closer to imperial household, it had morphed into a proposal that "the only road to promote all-out war in the true sense of the term was through some positive steps from the imperial household," in the words of Shōwa Research Association member Yabe Teiji. Cited in HEISIG 2015, 321.

the sole measure of "membership," there would be no such identity called "the Kyoto School."

Tanabe's thought and activity during the Pacific War deserves much more investigation. It is hindered in part by a lack of primary sources, for Tanabe stopped publishing his philosophy from late 1941 until his work on metanoesis at the end of the war—a hiatus that Kosaka Kunitsugu, somewhat implausibly, interprets as Tanabe's way of resisting fascism by way of silence.[21]

In retrospect, the selective attention that political critics have given to relatively few writings associated with the "Kyoto School" is sharpened by their tendency to identify the School with its most offensive wartime texts and, further, to isolate them from writings and thinkers not associated with the Kyoto School. The myopia of many critics will be corrected only when their targets are considered in the much broader context of the writings and activities of Japanese intellectuals in the first half of the 20th century, including those considered to be to the "left" and the "right" of the "Kyoto School" philosophers in question.[22] And since other philosophers who have been

21. Kosaka 2001, 245. To the extent that this hiatus actually constitutes silence, its motivation is difficult if not impossible to discern. It might, for example, have been a consequence of Tanabe's feelings of impotence or ineffectiveness in continuing work on his regulative idea of the nation-state as open versus closed species, or it might have been mostly due to bad health. Tanabe did present a lecture to a select group on the logic of the Co-prosperity Sphere in September 1942, summarized in Ōhashi 2001, 227–44.

22. I have in mind the kind of expansive treatment given to the case of Heidegger in Hans Sluga, *Heidegger's Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press), 1993. Najita and Harootunian 1998, 238–40 (originally 1989) pretended to set the thought of "the Kyoto faction," identified as Koyama, Kōsaka, Suzuki and Nishitani, in the context of a wider "revolt against the West" but reduced their thought to a few statements in the *Chūōkōron* symposium chosen to illustrate their "fascism," which, although undefined, seems to be equated with "Japanese imperial expansion." Rather than being an exception to refractive and reductive readings focused on the war, the treatment in that essay has served as a model for them. Parkes 1997 and 2011 offer a critique of such treatments. The recent volume edited by Murthy, Schäfer, and Ward 2017 promises a more expansive reading of the Kyoto School by re-examining it "in relation to Marx's analysis of capitalist modernity" (2). It argues that reading "the Kyoto School" "through the lens of Marxism" can reveal not only how its philosophers interacted with Marxism but more significantly how its thought is historically mediated by material and social conditions, by "social being" (6–7). But "the war" continues to identify the Kyoto School, which otherwise remains undefined in this collection: "...any scholar of the Kyoto School cannot avoid the questions of capital, war, and empire. The

identified with the School play no part in the controversy about wartime positions,[23] critics need to consider the controversial figures simply as individuals and not as representatives of a particular "School," just as the participants in the Overcoming Modernity symposium did not identify Nishitani, Shimomura, and Suzuki Shitaka as a "Kyoto-School" faction.

Needed also is some scrutiny of the ways that investigators choose evidence in support of their positions. In addition to the questionable procedure of refractive reading, in which a philosopher's text, or his entire oeuvre, is read through the lens of carefully selected offensive statements, other issues deserve critical attention. There are, for example, questions of whether to include private correspondence in judging a philosopher's position, and whether to allow esoteric as well as exoteric readings of a text. In 1994, Pierre Lavelle published a critique of Nishida that argued the philosopher was, unsurprisingly, an ultranationalist whose writings merely echoed the official position of the government. Michiko Yusa, in response, showed how Nishida's private correspondence contradicted that assessment. Lavelle responded that private letters might be relevant for intellectual biography, but for history it is Nishida's public involvement that counts; Nishida himself accorded less value to his private communication.[24]

My opinion is that, in a time when one's public pronouncements are subject to censure by the "thought police"[25] and serve as grounds for government harassment and imprisonment, a philosopher's private correspondence would seem all the more relevant for discerning his position,

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question of the Kyoto School's involvement in the war is unavoidable, given the open participation of many of its philosophers such as Nishitani Keiji, Kōyama Iwao, and others in the roundtables of 1942 on 'Overcoming Modernity' and 'World History,' which were connected to prowar ideology. The initial disputes in Japan concerning the Kyoto School concerned precisely the issue of war and empire..." (6).

23. Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889–1980), Mutai Risaku (1890–1974), Karaki Junzō (1904–1980, Takeuchi Yoshinori (1913–2002), and Abe Masao (1915–2006) are such philosophers associated with the Kyoto School, as are others active after the war, such as Tsujimura Kōichi (1922–2010) and Ueda Shizuteru (1926–2019).

24. "Correspondence," in *Monumenta Nipponica* 49.4, 524–9.

25. "Thought Police" (思想警察) refers to the *Tokubetsu Kōtō Keisatsu* (特別高等警察), often shortened to *Tokkō* (特高), a sub-bureau added to the Thought Section of the Criminal Affairs Bureau to investigate and suppress subversive ideologies. HEISIG 2001, 200 mentions its surveillance of Nishitani.

and much of that remains to be examined. An example is the private correspondence between Tanabe and Karaki Junzō. Another version of the same issue appears in a criticism of the way Ōhashi Ryosuke reads certain controversial documents. Ōhashi argues that the threat of harassment and censorship forced Kyoto School philosophers to speak in a kind of code. Kimoto Takeshi counters that "it is through the *exoteric* rather than *esoteric* thought war that these scholars could influence the public."[26] In his reading, public understanding and effect should trump privately expressed intention and covert activity. Another question is how and how much these philosophers actually did influence the public. These issues call for a hermeneutic that examines the conditions under which wartime discourse could be conducted at all.

Lessons for today

Rather than attempt a review of all recent, pertinent literature about the controversy and the critical assumptions at work in its analyses, I want here to ask what we today have to learn from the participation of the philosophers in question. I will pursue an answer in two parts: first by focusing more closely on a few relatively neglected topics in the two symposia, Overcoming Modernity and the *Chūōkōron* discussions—precisely because they have been the most controversial texts and most likely to give offense—and secondly, by probing the relevance of these issues for the world today.

What if we were to read *Overcoming Modernity* not through the lens of Japan's war but rather by placing some of its themes in a current global context? In fact, for the most part those symposiasts avoided the topic of that war.[27] And what if we were to read the *Chūōkōron* symposium—which did thematize Japan's war—in the context of geopolitics both at the time and today?

26. Kimoto 2009, 102.

27. I have found only four explicit mentions of the war: Kamei Katsuichirō calls Japan's war a "holy war" without elaboration (Calichman 2008, 49); the composer Moroi Saburō puts it in a "reciprocal relationship with the war in Europe" (71), and film critic Tsumura Hideo refers to "the present world war" (115). Suzuki Shigetaka repeats the official rational that the Greater East Asia War is being fought to overcome European domination (154).

Expanding two themes of current relevance in "Overcoming Modernity"

A few commentators have read *Overcoming Modernity* without taking that war as the sole measure of its underlying significance.[28] Calichman[29] and Takeuchi[30] discuss its diverse themes, although with recurrent reference to Japan's war. I propose that we go further and relate some of its themes to discussions beyond the question of any specifically Japanese modernity. Such a reading would not necessarily ignore the intent of the participants, insofar as they themselves pose the question of Japanese modernity by relating it to modernity worldwide. One consequence is evident: we cannot read the symposium as anything like a manifesto of a unified position, fascist or not, that would construct a "national-culturalist" ideology and prescribe a recovery of or return to a supposed original Japanese identity. Nor can we find a unified "Kyoto School" position on all the discussed themes. The unmistakable diversity of positions and perspectives makes these points abundantly clear.[31]

28. Minamoto 1994 discusses some major themes unrelated to the war. Frattolillo 2012 begins with Japanese militarism but moves on to the theme of an alternative subjectivity. Harootunian (2000, 34–94) mentions the war as the occasion of the symposium but quickly moves into broader conflictual forces behind capitalist modernity.

29. Calichman (2018, 30) makes a case for re-reading the symposium "so as to understand how our own ideas about such things as cultural transmission, subjective identity, East-West relations… are still informed… by the same presuppositions that haunted Overcoming Modernity." But the subtitle he gives to his translation, "Cultural Identity in Wartime Japan" as well as remarks in his Introduction indicate his tendency to read the symposium as a manifesto inseparable from the war. One example: "one must agree with Karatani's judgment that the symposium participants fell prey to constructing an aesthetic that was used for disastrous political ends" (xv).

30. Takeuchi 1959, as noted by Calichman, advocated reading the symposium in a context beyond its status as "a symbol of war and fascist ideology" (104, 113), isolating it in effect to the past, and reclaiming its legacy "with the greatest breadth possible" (118). Yet Takeuchi also inaugurates the habit of reading that symposium in conjunction with the *Chūōkōron* discussions, both in order to understand the meanings of overcoming modernity and to set it in the context of the war (104–5, 120–37).

31. And yet, critical commentators, as mentioned before, have tended to ignore the divergent perspectives of the physicist Kikuchi and the theologian Yoshimitsu, as opposed to some other symposiasts' tendency to valorize Japan. Calichman (2008, 16) reads into the text a uniform "national-culturalist," ideology constructed by symposium participants and having "destructive historical effects." He often refers to "the participants" as an indiscriminate whole and faults their ideology for disavowing "difference in the form of oppositionality" (18, 20) as well

Secularism

One theme that was vigorously debated among the participants in *Overcoming Modernity* concerns the place of religion in the modern world. This theme is relatively neglected in the treatments both by critical historians and by sympathetic philosophers. I have found that most if not all critics of the Kyoto School do not know what to make of the religiosity, the kind of faith or spirituality, felt by Nishida, Tanabe, Nishitani, Miki, and others, and this quandary on the part of readers is itself symptomatic of modernity.

My intent here is to relocate the symposiasts' remarks about religion in modernized Japan and consider them in light of the questionable place of religion in the modern world. In its European forms, that world has removed religion and faith from the center of social and public life. In discussions of European Christianity, this development goes by the name of secularism. Secularism (世俗主義) is not a term the Japanese symposiasts use, but I think some of them were debating an extension of this phenomenon insofar as they trace Japan's modernism to European modernism.[32]

There are three reasons to include their discussions on religion in current debates about secularism. First, that theme introduces a problem that goes beyond any political or nationalist context. Second, it places standard treatments of secularism in a context broader than Christian Europe and North America.[33] And third, it helps explain a trajectory in Nishitani's thinking that advances through a critique of modern nihilism to an examination of

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as for assuming such a thing as a pure Japanese culture, spirit or identity that can be infected by Western values and culture. At one point Calichman admits that he seeks some unity in the participants' diversity, but in effect this seems the very same sort of *imaginary unity* that he ascribes to their attempt "to restore Japanese identity to its proper unity" (15). In this respect, and despite a recognition in his Preface of "the tensions and real differences" and "disparate interpretations" of modernity (xii), his critique can be mobilized against itself. In his Introduction's own disavowal of difference and construction of a unity among all participants, Calichman repeats what he impugns.

32. In the *Chūōkōron* discussion of November 1941, Nishtani and Suzuki did explicitly mention secularization (世俗化) in their remarks about fundamental changes in European culture between the Middles Ages and the Renaissance. CK 58–9.

33. See Aike P. Rots and Mark Teeuwen, eds., Special Issue of *Japan Review* 30 (2017) for investigations into the "Formation of the Secular in Japan" prior to or outside of the symposia under discussion here.

the religious impulse in human beings.[34] Their diverse positions on the place of religion in modern society can reveal another side to the phenomenon of secularism that deserves further study. As a guideline, we may begin with Charles Taylor's monumental study, *A Secular Age*, and the influential if complex definition it offers. Taylor depicts the relevant meaning of secularism as the change "from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace."[35] Needless to say, Taylor's focus is Western Christian societies, in contrast to Muslim societies or India (his examples). This sounds quite different from what we would expect in the case of Japan, where belief in a single, transcendent deity has been marginal at best. But some symposiasts speak with regret about modern Japan losing sight of the gods, and the Catholic theologian Yoshimitsu laments the loss of faith and calls for a return to God.

During the symposium, Kamei Katsuichirō, identified with the Romantic School, declares that

> the most basic shortcoming of modernity lies in its status as an era of faithlessness… man's misery in being exiled from the gods. Present-day Japanese, this is, those of us who have lived through the "civilization and enlightenment" program of the Meiji period to the Taishō and Shōwa periods, are people who have lost sight of the gods…. The central issue of present-day thought is precisely the resurrection of the gods.[36]

Yoshimitsu Yoshihiko proclaimed that "modern man is not a simple unbeliever. Rather he is a tragic figure who has lost his faith. He must thus rediscover God through his self-consciousness."[37] As a Catholic theologian and a cosmopolitan who did not distinguish between Japan's modernity and Europe's, Yoshimitsu was somewhat of a black sheep at the symposium.

34. Going beyond the issues of secularism and nihilism, Söderman 2018 offers a perceptive survey of Nishitani's critique of modernity throughout his career, and concludes that its Nietzschean slant fails to appreciate the social political aspects of modernity.

35. Taylor 2007, 3.

36. Calichman 2008, 168–9.

37. Ibid., 159. Yoshimitsu's call for a "return to God" also contrasts with the appeal of participants who do seek to recover the "purity" of the "Japanese spirit" or original Japanese identity. It represents one example of why this appeal cannot serve as a "common underlying principle" that all participants shared, as Calichman claims (15).

But other participants did not simply rebuff his call for a "return to God." Nishitani remarked that if "modernity is characterized by the fact that man has lost sight of God while at the same time fundamentally seeking Him… isn't it the case that modern man has not sought God in the same manner as did men of the Middle Ages?"[38] And Suzuki, a historian of the Western Middle Ages, suggested one way to overcome modernity without advocating it, namely, by looking back to the Middle Ages and appreciating its religiosity.[39] Shimomura was only peripherally interested in the loss of religiosity and seems not to associate it with the scientific spirit of modernity. Charles Taylor similarly tends to decouple modern secularism from the rise of science and reliance on reason. In any event, it is clear that the symposium participants who take a position on secularism and religiosity do not divide neatly into groups such as "Kyoto School," Romantics, or "Literary World" figures. Even among the three participants later identified with the Kyoto School, we find a significant diversity of views.

Nishitani addressed the issue at length, but in a manner that transposed it from a problem to a challenge. When Charles Taylor described secularism in general terms, he depicted it as a society's loss of goals beyond human flourishing in this world.[40] Nishitani characterizes that situation as a "radical immanence" and says Western religiosity reached an impasse when it failed to unite that newly emergent immanence with its former radical transcendence. For him, the challenge is not to recover a lost sense of connection to the gods, or to God, nor is it to try to reestablish one-sided transcendence. The challenge, rather, is to discern the groundlessness of the human self and to place its meaning in service to others. And only the Eastern "religion of subjective nothingness" is up to the task.[41] Later, to encompass both the transcendent and the immanent and to open his view to Yoshimitsu the theologian, he says that the Buddhist notion of nothingness "can be understood as the manifestation or revelation of God [above all, in mysticism] and may be described from man's perspective as the negation of each and

38. Ibid., 159.
39. Ibid., 160.
40. Taylor 2007, 18.
41. Calichman 2008, 57.

every 'I.'"[42] Religiosity must be discovered by probing into our own subjectivity and uncovering its egoless base, or better, its absence of ground. This "subjectivity of no-self" offers a way to resolve the modern rupture between religion and science. In the spirit of selflessness, religiosity allows the sciences to pursue an impersonal standpoint indifferent to the human, but also transcends that standpoint and fulfills ethical and religious needs.[43]

At one point, Nishitani's comments turn overtly political and interrupt any attempt to recontextualize them. His comments become controversial not only for claiming the singular ability of an Oriental religion of subjective nothingness to overcome modernity; even more questionable is how he offers that religion to the service of the Japanese nation-state. This offer is encapsulated in his frequent usage of the wartime motto, *messhi hōkō* (滅私奉公), that Calichman translates as "self-annihilation in devotion to the nation." One passage reads,

> Today the state is forced to be quite thoroughgoing in its requirement [to suppress the arbitrary freedom of the individual] because of its emphasis on "self-annihilation in devotion to the nation".... "Self-annihilation" basically means extinguishing the arbitrary ego or egoistic self.[44]

The first half of the phrase, 滅私, as Calichman translates Nishitani, "basically means extinguishing the arbitrary ego or egoistic self." In fact, this phrase derives from Meiji-Period politics, not from Buddhist or Zen philosophy, and generally connoted selflessness. Minamoto Ryōen interprets this standpoint as extinguishing the petty ego.[45] The second half of the motto translates more literally as "devotion to the public"; in the Meiji Period it meant dedication to the public or official good.[46] In the context of Nishi-

42. Ibid., 166.

43. Ibid., 56–7, 167. I have drawn out the implications that Nishitani's comments suggest here and elsewhere. An argument for or against his resolution remains a task. For more on his view of science, see his essay, "Science and Zen," in Frederick Franck, ed., *The Buddha Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 111–37.

44. Calichman 2008, 56; the original is found in Takeuchi 1979, 26.

45. Minamoto 1994, 218.

46. The phrase was a slogan used after the Meiji Restoration of 1868 to foster service and devotion to the emperor as the embodiment of the official public good. "'Annihilation of the private for the sake of the official' meant giving up the 'private' to repay moral indebtedness and dedicating oneself to the 'official'.... 'Official' meant the emperor's will and intention as ex-

tani's comments, the motto can also be translated as "selfless, patriotic service." As offensive as that may sound from a postwar viewpoint, it did not necessarily imply giving up one's life for the nation. Nishitani promoted service to the public, the nation in this case, over individual freedoms, and apparently he considered the nation as the common good and greater cause that individuals are to serve.[47] But his recognition that the nation too might be following its own petty ego, and pursuing its own self-interest, does not come until later, at the end of the essay he submitted.

There Nishitani applies the idea of self-negation to the nation-state. Overcoming the spirit of modernity, he suggests, requires "a kind of state-negation marked by an inclusiveness that allows each nation to take its own place" in a global world.[48] For many critics, such statements only indicate Nishitani's naiveté or, worse, blatant nationalism, and for two reasons: he equivocates between the ideal state that should be and the actual state that is, and he ignores the Japanese state's colonization of other nations at the time. If we understand Nishitani as referring to an ideal, then his restraint on any one nation parallels his restraint on any one citizen and promotes subordination to a higher unity. That issue alone is relevant for both supporting and critiquing unions such as the United Nations. In retrospect, it seems that Nishitani, here and in his fuller statement in *View of the World, View of the Nation*, presented his theory as if he were living and writing in a state that allowed the individual to freely offer itself to a higher unity,

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ecuted by government. With this, the 'private' was swallowed by the 'official'... after the war [the slogan] simply replaced the emperor as「公」by the president of a corporation.... More recently, it has been said that 滅私奉公... had been reversed to become 滅公奉私... 'annihilation of the official for the sake of the private.' Post-war freedoms led to what was called 'me-ism,' or selfishness." Nagasaka 2008, 107. The third edition of the *Daijirin* (大辞林) dictionary explains the meaning of the phrase as "abandon one's private heart and devote oneself to the public" (私心を捨てて公のために尽くすこと).

47. This interpretation is consistent with the notorious propaganda manifesto, *Kokutai no hongi*, issued by the Ministry of Education in 1937, 天皇の御ために身命を捧げることは、所謂自己犠牲ではなくして、小我を捨てて大いなる御稜威に生き、国民としての真生命を発揚する所以である。["Offering our lives for the sake of the emperor does not mean so-called self-sacrifice but the casting aside of our little selves to live under his august majesty and to exalt genuine life as the people"]. JPSB: 1023, translation adjusted.

48. Calichman 2008, 61.

rather than under a totalitarian regime that forced the individual's self-negation.[49]

Be that as it may, self-sacrifice and thoughtless devotion to a nation-state do not necessarily follow from Nishitani's philosophy of "subjective nothingness." Nishitani developed it in work completely outside the context of Japan's wartime situation, and commentators tend to separate his political treatises both from his earlier work on elemental subjectivity and from his later work on nihilism and religion.[50] At the same time, by focusing on Nishitani's response to Nietzsche and Heidegger, commentators tend to separate his work on nihilism from the issue of secularism. Nihilism and secularism are related but distinct problems. Secularism describes the public place (or lack) of religion in society; nihilism describes the interior place (or lack) of belief within the human heart. One can be a believer within a thoroughly secular society, as most North Americans apparently are, but one cannot be a believer and a nihilist. Nietzsche and Heidegger diagnosed our godless age as a consequence of the "death of God" and the withdrawal of the gods, respectively, but spoke little about religion and the need to reconceive its place—the themes that inaugurate Nishitani work, *What Is Religion?* (translated as *Religion and Nothingness*). After the war, Nishitani himself tended to dissociate religion from politics and social life and to interiorize religion, perhaps because of his misadventures into national politics.[51] Two commentators have raised questions about the social scope of the idea of nothingness. Minamoto Ryōen, writing about the Overcoming Modernity symposium, questioned whether the idea of subjective nothingness "can be extended to all aspects of human and societal existence."[52] Kosaka Kunitsugu, writing about the Kyoto School conception of absolute nothing in general, questions whether it can free itself from its contemplative or experiential roots in Mahayana Buddhism and achieve instead "a

49. See Maraldo 1994; also Mori 1994 and Heisig 2001, 195–200 for summaries of *View of the World, View of the Nation*.

50. With regard to Nishitani's later work, Rieu 2015 is an exception. His analysis interprets overcoming modernity in general as a "syndrome," still widespread today, of "the psychosocial state of a society in a period of deep political and cultural instability" (Résumé).

51. Davis 2008 gives a more detailed and nuanced account of Nishitani's turn from religion to politics and then from politics to religion.

52. Minamoto 1994, 229.

truly active or historical-formative character."[53] That issue aside, it would be worthwhile to investigate the potential of a philosophy of no-self to address current problems of interest to both secularists and believers.

Machine civilization

The problem of secularism is linked to the second topic I want to touch on. For some of the participants in Overcoming Modernity, the loss of the gods meant a loss of spirit, whether that was supposed to be an original Japanese spirit or the spirituality of humans. One of the defining features of secularism for many philosophers today is the tendency to explain the human person solely in mechanistic and materialistic terms, to lose sight of the spiritual in some sense of the word.[54] During the symposium, the Romantic Kamei Katsuichirō spoke nostalgically of a "spiritual crisis," and described the threat of mechanization not in terms of the metaphysical reduction of the individual person but the social reduction of culture. For him, the West's "machine civilization" (機械文明) destroys (traditional Japanese) sensitivity (感受性).[55]

The film critic Tsumura Hideo described "the United States as a material and machine civilization"; the historian Suzuki Shigetaka saw "democracy, machine civilization, and capitalism all deriving from the same root," and literary critic Kobayashi Hideo exclaimed, "the soul hates machines, and so cannot battle against them."[56]

Other participants repeated the worry about machine civilization, while Shimomura spoke up for science and criticized that kind of thinking. He posed the issue as "the nature of [the] machine-making spirit itself": "The tragedy of modernity lies in the inability of the soul of old to keep up with the machine-body," in other words, in antiquated notions of soul versus body. "What is required are social or political methods as well as a new wis-

53. Kosaka 2018, 251, originally published in Japanese in Fujita 2001. Note that Kosaka's question repeats Nishida's language of a "historically formative" (歴史形成的) force that Kosaka opposes to a contemplative (心境的) Buddhism. "Contemplative" suggests "unengaged," in contrast to current "engaged Buddhism."

54. Hart 2017 places the erosion of faith, at its most profound level, in the reductionist naturalism of the sciences.

55. Calichman 2008, 42, 47.

56. Ibid., 203.

dom or perhaps theology." Shimomura saw modern specialization, and the rupture between science and religion, in positive terms. What is fortunately lost, he clarified, is science as naive metaphysics and religion as naive science. It is good that religion and science have become purified of one another, and must remain so. In contrast to the ancient Western way of knowing based on argumentation and reason, modern scientific knowing is proven by experiment and is technological in essence, resulting in "the formation of machinery," so as to reorganize, reconstitute, and remake nature, making it possible to discover things that do not naturally occur.[57] There is a sense here, Nishitani noted, of "nature coerced by human force." Kobayashi called it "torturing nature so that it reveals its secrets."[58] One might today think of the discovery of elements and particles that do not occur in nature, using particle accelerators like the $10 billion Large Hydron Collider in Geneva that supplied evidence of the "God particle," the Higgs boson. "The CERN facility as a whole uses 1.3 terawatt hours of electricity (1.3 trillion watt hours) every year, enough to power 300,000 homes."[59]

Diverging from most other participants, the playwright, novelist and critic Nakamura Mitsuo criticized the way that Japan imported ready-made modern Western science and technology without knowing how it was achieved historically. In his view, Japanese lacked the capacity to think for themselves.[60] In retrospect, Nakamura's comments and Nishitani's remarks about modernity's fragmentation of knowledge[61] seem to foretell how extreme this aspect of our "machine civilization" has become. For decades now, the general public in countries the world over has been in a similar situation, having little idea of how the sciences conduct research, how medical doctors reach their diagnoses, and how the machines used in everyday life are made. Think, for example, of our ignorance about how our cell phones are designed and constructed, or under what conditions factory workers assemble them. Today the limitation that Nakamura points out also

57. Ibid., 204, 190, 164. I have taken Shimomura's comments out of chronological order here, but they are entirely consistent with one another.

58. Ibid., 163, 165.

59. https://www.alintaenergy.com.au/wa/blog/fun-facts/june–2017/what-powers-the-large-hadron-collider.

60. I adapt this summary from Minamoto 1994, 216.

61. Calichman 2008, 51–2.

describes the scientific community worldwide. As a consequence of hyper-specialization and the perceived irrelevance of history, scientists and engineers themselves are not in a position to understand research and technical know-how outside their own fields.

To place the theme of "machine civilization" in a more global context, outside that of Japan's war and modernity, no critique is more apt than that of Lewis Mumford. Already in 1934 Mumford published a detailed examination of the effects of the machine on civilizations through the ages, beginning with the clock in the early Middle Ages and progressing to 20th century manufacturing. Mumford's 1934 work, *Technics and Civilization*, anticipated his later critique, in 1967, of what he called the Megamachine, the stage of "civilization" in which science, technology, economy and political power converge to form the reigning framework for evaluating all aspects of human life. Instead of primarily using machines to improve our life, we become accessories to machines and come to live for them. The Megamachine oppresses and dominates "human creativity and freedom, and operates in a way that is out of our control."[62] What we may call spiritual values are suppressed. This verdict resonates with the Japanese symposiasts' worries about machine civilization and its effects on modern Japan. But Mumford's non-Marxist critique of capitalism also highlights the conditions under which machines are made, an aspect of the "machine-making spirit" that Shimomura failed to consider. Most important for our shift of contexts is Mumford's insight that the Megamachine is "the social and bureaucratic structure that enabled a ruler to coordinate a huge workforce to undertake vast and complex projects. Where the projects involved conquest, we face a 'military machine'."[63] War is "the supreme drama of a completely mechanized society," Mumford had written already in 1934.[64]

It is somewhat ironic that the critics of machine civilization in the Overcoming Modernity symposium did not comment on the enormous war machine consuming their nation at the time—not only the manufacture

62. Brennan and Lo 2016.

63. According to the summary of Mumford's *Pentagon of Power: The Myth of The Machine,* in the online World Heritage Encyclopedia http://www.self.gutenberg.org/articles/the_myth_of_the_machine.

64. Mumford 1934, 309.

of munitions and weapons, but also the coordination of the entire society toward the war effort, including a vast propaganda machine and control of the press. Yet on this occasion the symposiasts seemed oblivious of the war machine right in front of their eyes. The fact that they were expressing their views under the watchful eyes of the censors does not entirely explain their silence about this obvious connection, for the most vociferous critics of machine civilization seemed also to be the most patriotic.[65] Be that as it may, their concerns about the hegemony of a "machine civilization" are relevant far beyond the confines of that Japanese war. Today we are overcome by an incessant flurry of constantly changing "breaking news" that diverts our attention. Without much public notice at all, a Mega-war-machine is now able to extend its invisible arms across continents to launch drone strikes on declared enemies and innocent bystanders thousands of miles removed from their executors and the "pentagons of power" they inhabit.

Global "war-denying warfare" in the light of Japan's war

We have returned to the topic of war. And to place Japan's war in the wider context of geopolitics both at the time and today, we will need to turn once more to the controversy regarding the second symposium, the infamous *Chūōkōron* discussions. Recall that three sessions took place before and after the Overcoming Modernity symposium and so flanked it on both sides. As is by now quite clear, the texts of these symposia strike contemporary readers in quite different ways. Rereading these texts in comparison with recent translations, I found myself tossed about by the waves of controversy again. I marveled at Calichman's fluid rendering of *Overcoming Modernity*, but resisted the assumptions and the slant of the critique in his Introduction.

65. Eight months earlier, the four participants in the *Chūōkōron* discussion had touched on "the problem of machine civilization," and one did relate it to warfare. The participants all identified the problem itself as the exteriority of technology overwhelming the interiority of the human spirit. Kōyama mentions Friedrich Dessaur's view that technology can lead to the abolition of war, but Nishitani rejects any idea that technology can save the world. At the end, Kōsaka Masaaki suggests that modern, total war may be said to be the product of machine civilization, but then a people's subjectivity could be challenged beyond its limits in trying to place mechanistic structures under its own control. Kōsaka then poses two somewhat ambiguous questions: thinking along these lines and finding the ethical substance of the individual in the historical praxis of the people, would it not be possible to escape the rupture of machine civilization? Is not this sort of dialectic at work in modern wars that are total wars? CK, 37–43.

I found myself being defensive of Nishitani and other symposiasts. Then I read David Williams' "reading" of the *Chūōkōron* discussions—he hesitates calling it a translation—and I was struck by quite the opposite of what his defense intended by calling it a philosophy of wartime resistance.[66] I was astonished at how fascist many of the philosophers' statements sounded, in the sense of fascism carefully defined by Umberto Eco, who grew up under its oppression.[67] Even where the Japanese philosophers did not sound fascist, it often felt as if I were reading a speech by Napoleon, or Hegel valorizing the "World Spirit on Horseback." Were their thoughts just dangerous illusions? The rationale for Japan's leadership and necessary war sounded like a play to be performed on the stage of world history, but a play only, where no one really dies or suffers. Williams "reading" was published in 2014; a year later Ōsaki Harumi completed a dissertation for McGill University called "Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan," subsequently published as a book. As the dissertation abstract states, this work argues that the Kyoto School's

> moral philosophy... is permeated by an ethnocentrism that lends itself to the theoretical justification of the formation of the Japanese empire [so that] the Kyoto School's prewar and wartime discourses cannot be interpreted as resistance to the wartime regime, as claimed by revisionist scholars. [This work] warns of the deception, found in both the Kyoto School and revisionists' thinking, of cloaking ideologies aimed at legitimating the oppression of others under the cover of morality.[68]

66. The "resistance" in Williams account is deeply ambiguous. It is clear that participants in both symposia were unified in their resistance to Western imperialism. But on the one hand, Williams valorizes the Greater East Asia War as a justified reaction to Western, White colonialism and imperialism, and so cannot plausibly say the *Chūōkōron* symposiasts were resisting that war. On the other hand, he follows Ōhashi in claiming that they were collaborating with the Japanese Navy to resist the more aggressive policies of the Army.

67. Eco 1995 judiciously identifies fourteen family-resemblance-like features of the fuzzy concept. One of the most important is the substitution of a monolithic People, expressing some imaginary Common Will, for individuals with their own rights; in large numbers where there can be no common will, a Leader pretends to be the Voice of the People. Two other features are the belief that life is permanent warfare and the elitism that one nation is the best in the world. Kōsaka Masaaki's and others' references to "the people" (民族), their talk of eternal war, and their belief in Japan's superiority among Asian nations, easily fit this pattern.

68. Ōsaki 2015, 3.

The work covers the moral and political philosophy of Nishida and the four participants in the *Chūōkōron* discussions, but also includes the Overcoming Modernity symposium—all read through the lens of Japan's war. "Even if," Ōsaki writes, "even if it is the case that these philosophers were forced to publicly state what they did not mean… their statements were nonetheless used to mobilize people and to plunge them into disaster." The positive side of Ōsaki's agenda is "to open a 'place' where dialogues and exchanges of particularities actually can occur."[69]

One point of dispute about the reliability of sources illustrates not only the fervor of the controversy but also the relevance of the discussions for understanding today's geopolitical situation. Ōsaki alludes to the so called Ōshima Memorandum that, in the minds of some, throw a mitigating light on the philosophers' statements. In 2001 Ōhashi Ryosuke publicized a memorandum he had discovered by Tanabe's student, Ōshima Yasumasu. The document tells of secret meetings in 1942 and 43 between the Japanese Imperial Navy, represented primarily by Rear Admiral Takagi Sōkichi, and Kyoto School philosophers. In 2015, Ōhashi repeated his conviction that this memorandum "shows the philosophers collaborated with the secret service of the navy, but in order to oppose the colonial war which was promoted under the hegemony of the army." Meetings like this were "extremely dangerous at that time."[70] If the philosophers cooperated with the war effort, it was an "anti-regime cooperation" "for the secret meetings did not so much 'assist' military rule as they were 'anti-regime' actions that tried to resist its policies."[71] Ōhashi argues further that we must read *through* the war discourse, in the *Chūōkōron* symposium for example, to discover a covert war of thought hidden behind statements that seem to promote war. Independently, David Williams uses the Memorandum to support his defensive reading of the symposium.

Ōsaki for her part considers Ōhashi's sources as unreliable on the basis

69. Ibid., 1; Ōsaki 2019, xii.

70. Ōhashi 2015. To indicate the risk the philosophers and navy members took, Ōhashi cites the Minister of State's announcement to the Parliament at the time, "Those who try peace moves against the national policy will not be guaranteed their safety, even when they are ministers."

71. Ōhashi 2001, 22, cited in Kimoto 2009, 99. Davis 2019 summarizes the Ōshima memoranda.

of a critique of the Kyoto School published in English in 2009.[72] Kimoto Takeshi had found discrepancies in Ōshima's accounts that, added to Ōhashi's purported bias toward his teachers, supposedly make his defensive interpretation highly questionable.[73] Kimoto's analysis of the *Chūōkōron* discussions also claims to expose several contradictions or "antimonies" in the concept of total war that the philosophers advocate. Despite some apparent problems, this critique offers an important counterpoint to David Williams' defense.[74] Kimoto's conclusion, that the philosophers ultimately rendered the notion of war meaningless, deserves close attention. I suggest that they alter the meaning of war in a way that explains aspects of warfare today.

Before relating the *Chūōkōron* discussions to today's geopolitical situation, however, let us first recall the situation of the early 1940s, when the discussions were held. It is not difficult to find support for the participants' contention that Japan was waging a war against Western imperialism. Critical historians often note this aspect of the "revolt against the West" but

72. In contrast to her dissertation, Ōsaki's book relegates this point of dispute to a footnote: Ōsaki 2019, 266–7.

73. Kimoto (2009, 101) repeats Iwasaki Minoru's criticism of Ōhashi's hermeneutics as reducing things to the past context of their meanings as if that were a fixed reality. I agree that "effective history"—to use Gadamer's term—is relevant in determining the postwar significance of wartime statements. But if we should not "reduce" all meanings to the context of their past utterance, neither can we discard that context if we are to understand their effects. Kimoto himself seems to reduce Ōhashi's defense to the past context of his amiable "relation with his mentors, including Nishitani Keiji."

74. Two of Kimoto's criticisms in his overall analysis are problematic. First, his interpretation of the philosophers' notion of subjectivity is confused. He opposes their subjective position with objective world history (p. 109), subjective standpoint with objective truth (p. 113), and subjective ideas with objective ideas (Kimoto 2009, 119), as if "subjective" were referring to the epistemological subject (主観 versus the object 客観) and at times to a personal and intuitive (subjective) truth. In fact, the philosophers' term 主体(性) for subject(ivity) denotes not only a level of awareness but also agency and autonomy. (Calichman 2008, 39 seems to make the same mistake of opposing subjective and objective in his criticism of Nishitani.) Curiously, Kimoto also makes puns, possible only in English, on equivocal meanings of "subject" or "subjective," confusing 主体 with the imperial subject (臣民, p. 121) and with being made "subject to" something (p. 113). Second and more importantly, Kimoto asserts, but fails to document, four putative antimonies between (1) the philosophers' avowed anti-capitalism and their implied exploitation, (2) their proclaimed anti-imperialism and concealed avocation of domination and hierarchy, (3) their claim to universal truth and avocation of hegemonic power, and (4) their total war without end and war that possessed an end (120–1).

often consider it a pretense and seldom offer details of Western colonialism. In 1941 the United States still exerted power over the Philippines, Guam, American Samoa, and Puerto Rico as colonies of one sort or another, and it claimed as its territories the Hawaiian Islands and numerous others in the Pacific. Indochina was a French colony; the British Empire and the Commonwealth constituted a global superpower exerting economic and political control of a quarter of the world's population. A few people welcomed Japanese forces as liberators.[75] Throughout the twentieth century, U.S. leaders appealed to America's "manifest destiny" extending beyond the continental U.S. in its *exceptional* mission to promote "a world democracy based on the American example and led by the United States."[76] We can easily hear echoes of the Japanese philosophers' rhetoric in Woodrow Wilson pronouncements some twenty years earlier, when he believed that World War I "was really like a holy war" and "could be a war to end all wars," according to one historian.[77] Under Wilson's Leadership, the Treaty of Versailles did not extend its "self-determination of all people" to non-white peoples.[78] Wilson's proclaimed New World Order and his League of Nations conveniently excluded a place for Japan, so it is not entirely surprising that Nishitani and

75. In the Philippines, Emilio Aguinaldo "collaborated with the Japanese conquerors" in his ongoing rebellion first against Spanish and then against American colonizers. See Johnson 2004, 43. In 1940 the Vietnamese often welcomed Japanese troops, and the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious groups "openly collaborated with the Japanese," according to "Japanese Occupation of Vietnam" < https://alphahistory.com/vietnamwar/japanese-occupation-of-vietnam/>. (The initial Vietnamese welcome abruptly changed when the Japanese invaders began to take rice from the people.) Some African-Americans in that era condemned Western imperialism and even favored Japan's. William E. B. Du Bois, for example, considered "European colonialism [as] one thing, Japanese anticolonial imperialism another," for Japan's was a struggle against White imperialism. Du Bois echoed the view that Japan could lead Asia in this struggle, for its industrialization had (in paraphrase) "placed it in the historical role, of a force that could realize an 'Asia for the Asiatics' and inspire the Darker Races worldwide" (Rasberry 2016, 101). Rasberry derives her view of the Kyoto School solely from Kimoto's 2009 article.

76. Johnson 2004, 51. A sense of "manifest destiny" was also at work in the American postwar occupation of Japan, according to Dower 1999, 217.

77. Nancy Unger, cited in "World War I: 100 Years Later. When America's Most Prominent Socialist Was Jailed for Speaking Out Against World War I," *Smithsonian.com*. June 15, 2018; https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fiery-socialist-challenged-nations-role-wwi–180969386/.

78. C. Johnson 2004, 50.

the other philosophers wanted to reclaim Japan's central role in yet another New World Order.

This picture presents one side of the symposium's double-sided structure mentioned by Takeuchi Yoshimi. The other side is Japan's own colonial invasions and "demand for leadership in East Asia."[79] In the *Chūōkōron* talks, the four professors admit that Japan's military actions in China might appear to the Chinese to be imperialist, but they insist this is a misunderstanding.[80] Here we need not rehearse the undisputed facts of Japan's imperialism. What I want to do instead is to employ a trick that teachers of philosophy often find instructive: suppose that a claim one seeks to question is actually the case, and then examine what the consequences are.

Let us, then, suppose the critical historians are justified in their condemnation of the Kyoto School. More precisely, let us suppose the philosophers in the *Chūōkōron* discussions did add grist to the war propaganda mill—out of naiveté, ignorance, false idealism, or simply arrogance. Shifting to today's geopolitical situation, what then can we learn from them? If they were blind to Japan's aggression, of what are we today all too often oblivious?

For one matter, there is the nature of the American empire. Some scattered facts about it are not big secrets, but they tend to get lost in daily news reports. An empire is maintained by its military power, and the United States today has approximately 800 military installations worldwide, including about 113 in Japan. They range from major military bases to small radar installations, are found in seventy countries and territories, and cost 100-150 billion dollars a year to maintain. Britain, France and Russia combined have 30 some foreign bases.[81] China appears to have two, one in the Horn of Africa and one in Tajikistan.[82] The Japan scholar Chalmers Johnson and

79. Takeuchi 1959, 135, 124–5. Takeuchi also speaks of Japan's "goal of world domination by driving out the West" yet notes that Japan did not aim at invasion or occupation of Western nations (135–6). Dower (1999, 216) remarks that "Japan's leaders in fact had never contemplated 'world conquest,' [although] this had been a staple of wartime American propaganda...." Presumably, then, its goal would have been dissimilar to that of Nazi Germany, or that later ascribed to Soviet communism.

80. ck 171–5. It is surprising that the participants in both symposia did not consider the question whether colonialism was a consequence of modernity. That question is overlooked in most if not all critiques of modernity; Bennet 2011, 129 notes some exceptions.

81. See Vine 2015.

82. If China does not presently exhibit a global military empire, it is still possible to see an

other historians offer reliable descriptions of the current American empire.[83] One treatment in particular, published in 2019, describes the new kind of empire that developed post World War II, when the U.S. decolonized or shifted the status of its territories. This new kind of empire has arisen where technology obviates the need for physical occupation. New technologies have enabled the U.S. to expand its power even without occupying other lands.[84]

What serves as a rationale for the American empire is its claim to being exceptional—just the sort of claim made by the philosophers for Japan's role in East Asia in the 1940s. America's claim to exceptionalism preceded Japan's by half a century, extended it globally, and continues to echo to this day. In 2015, Dick Cheney, with his daughter Liz who at this writing serves in the U.S. House of Representatives, published their book, *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America*:

> we are, as Lincoln said, "the last, best hope of earth." We are not just one more nation, one more indistinguishable entity on the world stage. We have been essential to the preservation and progress of freedom, and those who lead us in the years ahead must remind us, as Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Regan did, of the unique role we play. Neither they nor we should ever forget that we are, in fact, exceptional.[85]

There are two sides to this ideology. The Cheneys express one side: The United States provides an umbrella of safety for other allied nations, and protection from their aggressors. The Cheneys dissemble the other side: The

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emerging economic empire in its increasing ownership of natural resources in Asia, Africa and South America, along with its control of vast infrastructure developments across Asia, such as the "One Belt One Road (一带一路) Initiative." A few critics have compared China's initiatives to Japan's wartime "Co-Prosperity Sphere," e.g., Davis Hanson of the Hoover Institution, Stanford University, "China's New Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere," *Real Clear Politics* (November 23, 2017); https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2017/11/23/chinas_new_greater_east_asia_co-prosperity_sphere_135602.html).

83. Johnson 2004. See also Victor Bulmer-Thomas, *Empire in Retreat: The Past, Present and Future of the United States* (Yale University Press, 2018) and David C. Hendrickson, *Republic in Peril: American Empire and the Liberal Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

84. Immerwahr 2019, 17–18, 264, 314.

85. Cheney and Cheney 2015, 259–60.

United States protects global capitalism and the resources America needs to maintain the superiority of its military industrial complex.

The American empire is alive and well under Donald Trump, the U.S. President at this writing. It might seem that his "America First" policy is a retreat from American imperialism and exceptionalism. After all, it seems (sometimes) to reject or retreat from military intervention. But a unilateral approach to international crises can be more imperialist than ever by placing one nation above all others. Recall these words from Trump's inaugural address:

> We assembled here today, are issuing a new decree to be heard in every city, in every foreign capital, and in every hall of power. From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this day forward, it's going to be *only America first. America first.*[86]

To that end, there has been no retreat from maintaining the empire. Since Trump took office, the defense budget has grown to 892 billion dollars, about 16% of annual discretionary and mandatory spending. Whether America is declared first or not, it is simply delusive to suppose that any one nation can isolate itself from others, when all confront global warming and the possibility of nuclear war.

Another disguised matter concerns the issue of national identity. Appeals to national identity and purity are obvious enough in the United States and in Western Europe, in the German "Alternative für Deutschland" Party for example. In the context of shifting populations and immigration crises, today's appeals seem quite different from the claims by some of the Japanese symposiasts to an original, pure Japanese identity. Yet the current appeals are not limited to publicized right-wing extremists. One example appears in the sophisticated and nuanced views of one prominent European scholar, where we may hear a slight but distinct echo of Nishitani's notorious mention of an inclusive sphere within which non-Japanese could be educated to become "half-Japanese." Rémi Brague, who held the Guardini chair at the University of Munich from 2002 to 2013, has propounded a European

86. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpRzsMumtlQ; my emphasis. Note that the White House later redacted the speech to delete the word "only" that Trump had used. See https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/the-inaugural-address/

identity that is essentially Christian and that supposedly grew in counter-distinction to its others, the Greeks and the Jews, symbolized by Athens and Jerusalem. Brague does not seek to preserve a pure European identity, but rather identifies Europe as "a cultural reality" and is concerned with "what threatens… the Europeanness of Europe… what threatens its 'Romanity.'" He wants a Europe that invites others in—as long as they adopt the proper European attitude.[87] Brague expressed these views prior to the Muslim influx into Europe in the 2010s, and even then he seemed to ignore the pre-modern influence of Islamic culture on medieval philosophy and on European, especially Spanish culture, before 1492. Curiously, he makes little note of European colonization.

I come to a final matter: the reality of a situation announced by the four *Chūōkōron* symposiasts and recurrent in a different guise today—the reality of a kind of endless war. The Japanese philosophers spoke of "a new idea of war as creative and constructive, and in which the opposition between war and peace is sublated."[88] Japan's war was a "total war" beyond (the usual concepts of) war and peace; in some sense, it was an "eternal war." This striking description has puzzled commentators like Takeuchi and Kimoto, and it puzzles me. Kimoto wrestles with different, implied senses of the war's end and its eternity, and reaches the conclusion that these ideas form another antinomy or contradiction.[89] I see a different distinction at work. In the third roundtable discussion on November 24, 1942, Nishitani implies that a defeat would not necessarily mean losing the war or ending the war.[90] I suggest that he has in mind the difference between the military war and a continuing ideological war. His war of ideas (思想戦) aimed to establish a world order that accorded Asian nations their rightful place, and that would

87. Brague 2009, 180. Review by Scott Kistler of Brague's major work, October 22, 2010, https://temporachristiana.wordpress.com/2010/10/22/book-review-eccentric-culture-by/.

88. CK, 287–9. See Williams 2014, 272–4, although his rendition must be read with caution. The Croatian scholar Žarko Paić (2018) discerns a version of this situation today, and argues that we now live in a world of total and perpetual mobilization in which the contest between empires (like the U.S. and China) and rogue states has made obsolete the binary opposition of war and peace.

89. Kimoto 2009, 116–20.

90. CK, 282–3. See Williams 2014, 270.

be an unending task. He and the other symposiasts may not have imagined the kind of world order that did emerge, but I read them as anticipating a sense of warfare that deserves our attention today.

Unlike declared wars of determinable length and scope, a conflict of a different sort is evident in the "war on terrorism" that, as Kimoto recognizes, is without boundaries, spatial or temporal.[91] Not so evident is a current ideology that rationalizes war without end. A statement by Ryan Crocker, the former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Syria, Kuwait, and Lebanon, exemplifies my point. In January 2019, President Trump announced that he would withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and an interviewer then asked the former ambassador:

> National Public Radio interviewer Ari Shapiro: You've talked about the consequences of leaving Iraq too early, leaving Vietnam too early, leaving Afghanistan too early. Some people will hear this as an argument for endless war.
>
> Ryan Crocker: So here's the thing I've observed over many, many years in the Middle East. We as Americans lack patience. We want to get 'er done. That's how we built our own great country. The rest of the world works on a different clock. What our adversaries have seen over time is that, boy, if you create problems, eventually the Americans will leave; they'll get tired of it; they'll want to move on to something else. So that's what our adversaries count on. That's what our allies fear. We need to be sending the signal right now that we will be where we need to be to protect our interests, to protect our values for as long as it takes.[92]

This policy is the U.S. version of "eternal war," and the Trump administration continues it despite apparent withdrawals. It might also be seen as a continuation of an endless "cold war," or if not a continuation, then as a shift from an ideological and military war against communism to an ideological and military war against terrorism, from one interminable "ism" to another, in the endless fight to "protect our values." The question is whether such protections inevitably endanger us at the same time.

91. Kimoto 2009, 98. Curiously, Kimoto begins his analysis with this example of an endless war but does not reconsider the Japanese notion in light of it.

92. "Former U.S. Ambassador Says Withdrawal from Afghanistan is Surrender." NPR, January 31, 2019. https://www.npr.org/2019/01/31/690468874/former-u-s-ambassador-says-withdraw-from-afghanistan-is-surrender.

In conclusion

As philosophers and scholars, what we can learn, then, from the two controversial symposia that mark the "Kyoto School"? A careful reading shows that these individuals did not act and think as members of a school with a single coherent doctrine. But beyond that, what is the lesson? Is it to recognize our responsibility to identify and root out whatever dangerous illusions captivated those philosophers of the past? Or perhaps it is for philosophers to leave history to the historians, politics to the politicians, and remain aloof from discussions about national policies? Is the lesson simply the opinion that the war should not get the "final say" on what a philosopher writes? Or is it our task, an endless task, to let these philosophers awaken us to our own implication and complicity in a world order that subjugates some, privileges others, and often dehumanizes all? That thought poses a risk and a danger to Kyoto School critics and adherents alike. To coopt a translation of Nishida's "nothingness" by recent Marxist readers, we may speak of the *negativity* of some Kyoto School philosophers. The negative lesson, then, is to learn to see what they did not see. My objective here has been a simple one: to make more visible what our milieu today would rather leave lurking in the shadows.

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Abbreviations

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