

Defining Philosophy in the Making

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What is philosophy? The question seems to ask for a definition that one could write in a dictionary. Such a definition would describe philosophy as distinct from other things, would state what makes it what it is, would specify its whatness, its quiddity. It would determine this essence by distinguishing the essential features of philosophy from the accidental, contingent, or alterable characteristics that may accompany the appearance of philosophy wherever and however it has appeared. The definition would identify an unchangeable core, without which any of its appearances would not really be philosophy. We might find such an essence in the origins of philosophy, in the ancient Greek distinction between *mythos* and *logos*, the practice of reasoned words, and the search for unifying reasons and underlying principles. Philosophy's true beginning, then, would be an *arche* or principle that articulates a necessary, logical origin and not merely a historical one. Philosophy's definition would then be necessary and universal, not parochial or time-bound.

To define the essence we might also look directly at the word, *philosophia*: love of wisdom, of course—but in practice a love sprung from a sense of wonder or astonishment (Greek: *thaumazein*), and so love that is more a yearning *eros* than a settled *philia*, and a wisdom that is more a relentless quest than a standing awe. The quest as we see it in Parmenides originated when philosophy separated from its mother *mythos*, heard her voice, the voice of the gods, as distinct from its own, and begin to question the sayings of the gods. Philosophy developed a

voice, a *logos*, so deep and yet so overarching that it was soon able to speak for all other voices and account for all matters spoken about, able to give more shallow or limited accounts their proper place and name, *mythology*, for example. Philosophy's accounting became categorizing, determining not only the different parts of the one world but the different manners in which those parts are apprehended.

After philosophy gave birth to the sciences and they began to take on an identity of their own, vying with philosophy, philosophy called itself their queen mother. This overarching science, to be sure, had been hydra-headed all along, its voice sometimes a chorus and sometimes a discord, thriving on dialogue and debate and the kind of questioning that marked its earliest years, issuing eventually in multiple identity crises and doubts about its foundations, its pedigree, and its difference. For all its inner discord, however, philosophy has never ceased in self-questioning. In the last hundred years philosophy's quest to know itself is as much a mark of what it is as anything else. In a course called "Introduction to Philosophy," I routinely "define" philosophy for beginning students as the critical exploration of deeply perplexing questions. One of those questions is its very definition.

This entire reflection, of course, tells us little if anything about what exactly philosophy is. It hardly gives us a definitive statement, although it suggests some qualities often taken to delimit philosophy from other human endeavors: critical, fundamental, logical, systematic. More importantly, our reflection indicates just how distinctively Greek and "philosophical" is the very quest for a definition of philosophy. Essence versus accidents, underlying reasons versus capricious causes, origins and arche versus offspring and appearances, the name *philosophy* versus the various *ologies*, categories versus chaotic arrangements; persistent questioning, discursive dialogue, and disputations about difference and identity—are all expressions specifically if not exclusively of a Greco-European heritage.

We cannot escape this hermeneutical circle of defining philosophy, a Greek term treated in a Greek way. We can, however, employ the habit of questioning to seek other ways to determine the purview of philosophy. If the quest for a lexical or generic definition of philosophy is circular, and remains within the confines of a Greek origin, we need not stay within those confines. Indeed we cannot, if we are to understand the need today to reconsider defining philosophy.

DEFINING PHILOSOPHY AS DELIMITING IT
OR AS DEVELOPING IT

Not only we here, but many philosophers today undertake endeavors to define philosophy anew in a dual, sometimes dueling context of competition and reconciliation. Recent attempts to define philosophy bear this out. These attempts fall into two groups: intracultural, that is, within the Greek-European tradition; and inter-cultural, in cognizance of the intellectual achievements of other traditions and either accepting or rejecting their inclusion under the title *philosophy*. The resulting definitions similarly fall into two types: those that would delimit philosophy, set its boundaries in opposition to other disciplines and endeavors, and those that would expand the range of philosophy and allow it to develop.

One particularly interesting polemic that counters the movement to extend philosophy beyond its Occidental heritage is the 2002 work, *But Not Philosophy: Seven Introductions to Non-Western Thought*, by George Anastaplo. This book is polemical in the sense that its premise, stated in its very title, is never argued. The author himself makes no explicit attempt to justify his twofold judgment that philosophy belongs exclusively to the west as an unparalleled quest for the true nature of things. Nor does he himself offer a definition of philosophy. Late in the book he does approvingly cite Leo Strauss' statement:

Philosophy in the strict and classical sense is the quest for the eternal order or for the eternal cause or causes of all things. It presupposes then that there is an eternal and unchangeable order within which History takes place and which is not in any way affected by History.¹

1. Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, 471; cited in George Anastaplo, *But Not Philosophy: Seven Introductions to Non-Western Thought* (Lanham, Boulder, New York and Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002), 287. It is not clear that Anastaplo would himself include Jewish thought in the western philosophical tradition of Greek origin. As non-western non-philosophy he explicitly includes Mesopotamian thought (using the Gilgamesh Epic as an example). The other six non-philosophical traditions presented are "Ancient" African (including Egyptian) Thought, Hindu Thought (the *Bhagavad Gita*), Confucian Thought (the *Analects*), Buddhist Thought, Islamic Thought (the Koran), and North American Indian Thought.

Instead of argumentation what Anastaplo offers is supporting statements of opinion by commentators on his work. In his Preface he lets the political scientist Larry Arnhart speak for him. Arnhart reconstructs Anastaplo's view that the "European tradition that began in ancient Greece is superior to other traditions of thought" because of its discovery of nature and the rational way of inquiry, as opposed to an appeal to the authority of ancestral beliefs. Philosophy as a uniquely Greco-European method, inquiry for its own sake, was able to discover the unchangeable order of nature and thus to develop the natural sciences. "Since nature is universal, *there are intimations of nature in every tradition of human thought*, but only those traditions influenced by Greece show a fully explicit self-conscious awareness of nature as distinguished from custom or convention."² In the book's Foreword, John Van Doren writes that "We in the west are reasoners...."³ Anastaplo understands his project as expanding western education and appreciating other traditions, but his commitment to the delimitation of philosophy is clear. He speaks of the "challenge posed to those of us who look beyond the traditions and the texts familiar to the west" and then adds, "Much of the looking in this collection is with a view to illuminating what *philosophy* is and is not."⁴

Anastaplo's work may be seen the light of the greater project of University of Chicago scholars who compiled *The Great Books of the Western World* and produced the annual volumes, *The Great Ideas Today*. It supplements the agenda, pressed most strongly by Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, to counter the expansion of the general education curriculum at American universities beyond western classics. Apart from that agenda, however, Anastaplo's book suggests important questions and themes for our project to identify and compile Japanese philosophy. Do we find in Japanese traditions evidence of inquiry pursued for its own sake, or hints of such a basis for theoretical science? Is there an explicit, consciously formed notion of nature as opposed to human convention? Are these features necessary conditions of philosophy proper, philosophy as it is traditionally delimited? It would seem to me that the alternatives—inquiry for the sake of spiritual transformation, for example, or

2. Arnhart's statements that represent Anastaplo's views are cited on XVI–XVII. Italics are the author's.

3. Forward by John Van Doren to Anastaplo, XIII.

4. Preface, XVII.

theory necessarily informed by practice, or human cultivation as part of nature—are not only instructive but perhaps constitutive of a more developed definition of philosophy.

We have reviewed the historical bounds and the current context of defining philosophy, and have said why today we are called to define it once again; but we have not yet said clearly what we expect to accomplish. Every questioning, beside its motivation, has three components: its presuppositions, its objective, and the resources that might offer an answer. The question of what might count as Japanese philosophy presupposes that philosophy, whatever it has been, can be seen in a comparative light. The question asks for the proper purview of philosophy, and we look for an answer in the texts of Japanese traditions in comparison and contrast with discourse that already counts as philosophical. The circle of having to anticipate what one will find teaches us that we cannot simply apply a set of foreign criteria to the resources that might hold the answer. Rather we must let the texts themselves, in dialogue with questioning readers, suggest the criteria. This is to say, strongly and clearly, that philosophy is not finished but is still in the making. The project to define and to collect philosophy in Japan, I think, must proceed from what has been made—both the texts recognized worldwide as philosophical and the texts in question—to the continual making of philosophy in the world today, from the created to the creating as Nishida would say. An attempt to define philosophy in the making cannot issue in a single statement of what philosophy is. It can, however, point a way to allow what philosophy has been to develop further.

THE DEBATE ABOUT “PHILOSOPHY” IN MEIJI JAPAN

We are not the first to grapple with the problem of defining philosophy in Japan. In fact, this problem is as old as use of the term itself in that country. Both the term *philosophy* and the concept behind it were first introduced in Japan in the late 1860s as part of the vast cultural heritage of the west entering the country as the late-Tokugawa and early-Meiji governments re-opened Japan to the world.⁵ The nature and novelty of

5. We should note, however, that in the early 1800s the samurai scholar Takano Nagahide (d. 1844) authored an outline of western philosophy. Takano had risked his

this concept evoked a good deal of perplexity and even consternation. Indeed, if as the Greeks suggested perplexity itself counts as an origin of philosophical thinking, then the perplexity over the meaning and scope of that concept can be said to originate philosophy in Japan. Whether or not *philosophy* was a discipline restricted to European traditions or might be applied to traditional Japanese and Asian thinking was a subject of an intense if scattered debate. A review of that debate will prove instructive for us as we attempt to define philosophy a century and a half later. We shall pay particular attention to the meaning and the scope (the intension and extension) of philosophy for early Meiji writers.

First definitions: Nishi Amane

As is widely known, it was Nishi Amane 西周 (1829–1897) who introduced the term *philosophia* and then after several tries in the early 1870s established its translation as *tetsugaku* 哲学.⁶ Making attempts at translation came to be a defining feature of the early introduction of (western) philosophy into Japan. Do Nishi's attempts indicate that for him there was some counterpart to the western discipline at least in Chinese traditions, or some Chinese-based way to conceive this discipline? After all, instead of rendering the term in Chinese characters, he could have left it untranslated as ヒロソヒ. We have a tentative answer in his own words: "In our country there is nothing that deserves to be called philosophy; China too does not equal the west in this regard."⁷

Nishi's models of philosophy were the scientific positivism of Auguste Comte and the inductive logic and utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, the schools he had been exposed to in his studies in Holland in 1862 and 1863. Both represented a kind of logical, systematic knowledge that Nishi saw as largely absent in Japanese tradition. One of the very first attempts to inform Japanese intellectuals of the new discipline of philosophy is

career to study the west. See Kuwaki Gen'yoku, *Meiji no tetsugaku* (Tokyo, 1943), 10–12.

6. For a summary of Nishi's translation attempts, see my article "Contemporary Japanese Philosophy," in the *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, ed. by Brian Carr and Indira Mahalingam (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 811–12.

7. *Hyakugaku renkan*, in *Nishi Amane zenshū*, ed. by Ōkubo Toshiaki (Tokyo, 1945), 181; cited in Thomas Havens, *Nishi Amane and Modern Japanese Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 108–9.

Nishi's work 生性發蘊, composed between 1871 and 1873.⁸ While most of this work does no more than elaborate Comte's positivism, it does also suggest that the Japanese (and Chinese) have forgotten ways such as the inductive method of J. S. Mill but can relearn them from western philosophy. The west, on the other hand, has succumbed to "objective contemplation" (his own gloss of 彼觀) and can relearn what it has forgotten: what we need to know first is ourselves, our soul or 性理. Philosophy should return to "subjective contemplation" or 此觀 and begin with 性理学 (earlier, in 1862, 性理之学 referred to ヒロソヒ之学, the study of philosophy).

It is the style of this composition, however, that will prove to be philosophically significant. One thing that impresses the reader today as so alien is Nishi's rendering of the names and doctrines of the western philosophers by way of kanji used purely phonetically, a kind of *manyōgana*, a resurrection of an old practice used when the Japanese first imported the Chinese writing system. In retrospect his translation of names indicates just how *fremdartig* the whole business of philosophy was. Nishi endeavors to buffer the force of the new language by relating it to traditional learning, as alluded by a term in the title of the essay itself: 生性 is taken from a saying of Mencius' opponent Kao-tzu, "Life is what we call nature" 生之謂性, a formula that opposes one's natural condition to imposed, artificial morality. Yet in a sort of bricolage, Nishi replaces this classical dichotomy with a western one between matter and spirit 生性, so that his title can be translated "The Relation of the Physical and the Spiritual." Nishi Amane, then both ingeniously invented neologisms for western philosophical language and drew upon native categories in order to translate philosophy and other western traditions.⁹

For Nishi philosophy meant the practical unified science or discipline

8. Included in *Meiji tetsugaku shisōshū* (*Meiji bungaku zenshū* 80; Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1974), especially 4–5. Also in *Nishi Amane zenshū* vol. II (Munekata Shobō, 1961), 29–129.

9. Nishi also helped establish the standard translation of the then novel category *religion* as *shūkyō* 宗教, a term once used in a very few Chinese Zen texts to mean the teaching of a particular school or lineage. More often Nishi used another archaic term, *shūmon* 宗門, that became widespread after the reform of religion (*shūmon aratame* 宗門改め) inaugurated by the Tokugawa bakufu in 1640 as part of its policy of national isolation.

that underlies the particular sciences. His *Hyakuichi shinron* of 1874 defines it this way:

When we seek to clarify the laws of nature and the laws of man and simultaneously establish doctrinal methodology while in quest of the above-mentioned laws of nature and of the human mind, we call such intellectual activities philosophy, which is translated into Japanese as *tetsugaku*.¹⁰

The meaning of philosophy as a logical and systematic discipline is reflected in the terms Nishi chooses: philosophy systematizes by clarifying general laws and does so logically, establishing the methodology proper to the sciences. This definition of philosophy is also reflected in Nishi's own work on utilitarianism, where the quality of being practical comes to the fore. Nishi adapted Mill's practical syllogism in the service of promoting happiness for society. As Takeshi Koizumi points out, Nishi argued that we must proceed from the social purpose of a nation to the individual's choice of a means to achieve it, in contrast to beginning with individual choice and looking for a means to achieve the social purpose.¹¹ It may be said that in employing the syllogistic form Nishi was practicing the western discipline he learned, but by privileging the social over the individual he was adapting this form to a typically Japanese value system.

The scope of philosophy for Nishi seems broader than that indicated in his initial verdict—that in Japan “there is nothing that deserves to be called philosophy.” He is interested in modernizing Japan by showing that it must assimilate western disciplines and technology, but he is also eager to show that Japanese tradition can contribute to the modern world. Philosophy, he intimates, can incorporate the kind of self-study (此観) and social value traditionally practiced in Japan. Both in his practical bent and in his classification of western objective science and eastern subjective contemplation, he implies that philosophy is historically a western discipline and continuing achievement of the modern west, but is now open to development with the aid of “eastern” learning. With an

10. From *Nishi Amane zenshū*, vol. 1, 288–9; quoted in Takeshi Koizumi, “Morals and Society in Japanese Philosophy,” in the *Companion Encyclopedia of Asian Philosophy*, 796.

11. Koizumi, 798–9.

eye toward the future of his country, it is not altogether surprising that Nishi did not extend the term *philosophy* to past Japanese thinking.

A dialogue to define philosophy

In 1886 the Buddhist scholar and reformer Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) who later founded the Tetsugaku-kan, forerunner to Tōyō University, published a fascinating work entitled *Evening of Philosophical Conversation* 哲学一夕話 that begins with the problem of defining philosophy. Enryō opens his essay with an imaginary and humorous dialogue in which several passengers on a modern steamboat strike up a conversation about the meaning of *tetsugaku*, “a new kind of study that has come from the west,” and try to surmise its meaning.¹² Their perplexity is enormously telling.

One interlocutor proposes that it is the study of principles 理, but another counters that such study is physics 物理学, not philosophy, and if the *tetsu* of *tetsugaku* is that of *kentetsu* 賢哲, a wise man, then it might be the study of the *seiken* 聖賢, sages like Confucius and Mencius. The next passenger suggests that it is not “anything shallow like the study of Confucius and Mencius,” but perhaps something much more lofty, like Inoue Tetsujirō’s *New Theory of Ethics*. Yet another mentions that he read a book on the mind 心 by Nishi Amane, who has become known as a *tetsugakusha*, so *tetsugaku* must be the same as psychology 心理学. The last conjecture is that philosophy must be synonymous with Buddhist studies, since the Rev. Hara Tanzan recently became a professor in a university department of *tetsugaku*. An exchange expressing their perplexity ends the conversation: “Since all of your explanations differ, we cannot yet know just what *tetsugaku* is... well then that’s what *tetsugaku* is: whatever we cannot know!”

Enryō follows this quip with an explanation of his understanding of “pure philosophy,” based on a series of distinctions. The study of things with form, material things, is science 理学, and the study of formless, immaterial things is philosophy. From another angle, science treats of individual parts, while philosophy expounds on the whole; further, science is experimental while philosophy is the study of ideas 思想 and matters of the mind 心性. But pure philosophy is distinct from other

12. All translations of the *Conversation* are of the text in *Meiji tetsugaku shisō shū*, 43.

disciplines that have to do with matters of the mind, like psychology, logic, and ethics.

Pure philosophy 純正哲学, as the study of pure principle, must be called the study that inquires into the axioms of truth and the foundation of the disciplines. The objective of pure philosophy is to provide an interpretation and explanation of various problems that have arisen, such as what the substantial reality of the mind or of matter is, what their fundamental source is, or what relationship obtains between mind and matter.

Enryō then outlines the problems his treatise will discuss: the relationship between mind and matter and the question of what the world formed from; the substantiality of God and the question of whence matter and mind arise; and the nature of truth and the question of what grounds the various sciences.

This remarkably modern manner of making distinctions and formulating the problems is belied by a style of writing that today sounds archaic. For example, Enryō makes use of some Neo-Confucian terms such as 心性 to hint at what philosophy is. Defining philosophy was a matter of relating the unfamiliar in both familiar and innovative terms. In order to express more fully the meaning of *tetsugaku*, Enryō had not only to freely compose new *jukugo*, but also to appeal to other *yakugo*, some of which have become standard but with altered meanings. A term like 本体 (the “substantiality” [of God]), for example, is now standard for Kant’s *noumenon*, but in Enryō’s day was not a conventional word. Even if precise denotations remained elusive, any reader of *kanji* would easily be able to gather some sense from these freely composed *jukugo*. Today we must try to read with an altered sense the terms that were new at the time but now are very familiar. 実験 as a translation of “experimental” and 心理学 as a translation of “psychology,” for example, have become standard today but should be heard with a nineteenth-century ear.

In fact, in 1886 it remained to be seen which *jukugo* would become standard translations of western terms. The whole array of compounds, their components, and their word order, began as a mass of floating signifiers. There are numerous examples of *yakugo* or translated terms that are now perfectly familiar but would have been new to Japanese readers at the time. Examples are 論理学 or logic; 倫理学 or ethics, instead of the traditional term 道德; 真理 or [reasoned] truth, instead of simply 真

truth; 原則 or axioms (of [reasoned] truth), later used to translate *Grundsätze*, principles; and *bussbin* 物心 or matter and mind, as opposed to the traditional reading of 物心 as *monogokoro*, discretion. All these examples made use of familiar *kanji* and compounds and yet expressed something novel. The distinctions also follow this pattern. Enryō's distinction between 理学, what we would call the natural sciences, and 哲学, as well as the further distinction underlying it between things that have “form” 形質 and things that do not, can be traced at least to Fukuzawa Yukichi's 学問のすすめ. It could of course also be traced back to Aristotle's *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, but that would obscure the Buddhist origin of the distinction made by Enryō and other Japanese thinkers. The distinction must ultimately be seen as an attempt to render the imported disciplines intelligible by appealing to at least another distinction familiar to readers of that time.

Enryō took terms and methods established in one cultural context and tried to convey and implement them in another. He did not comment on the scope of philosophy, as far as I know, or on whether *tetsugaku* could be used to describe Japanese thought prior to the importation and translation of philosophy. But the perplexity in face of the “new discipline from the west,” and the struggle to convey its meaning in newly coined terms, hint that Enryō considered it unprecedented in Japan. On the other hand, it is clear that he saw himself as creating philosophy in his country as well as conveying a western heritage. His *Conversation* teaches us that defining philosophy in Japan is a creative endeavor. It calls for us to create new terms and draw novel distinctions in order to convey, or recreate, Japanese thought, and to do so in a sense of exploration rather than application of pre-determined criteria. Just as Enryō was engaged in the very creation of Japanese philosophy, so we are in translating texts philosophically. We shall return to the suggestion that one way to define philosophy is through the philosophical translation of texts.

The western analytic way and the eastern holistic way

The attempt to translate by relating the alien new to the familiar old is exemplified in an 1899 essay on self-knowledge by Nishimura Shigeiki 西村茂樹 (1828–1902), an advocate of the Enlightenment 啓蒙 movement and a founder of the Meiji Six Group (*Meirokeisha*). Nishimura invokes

Nishi Amane's characterization of east and west to define the difference between European philosophy and Japanese traditional thought:

Eastern learning has mostly sought the mind (*kokoro* 心) internally; western learning has for the most part sought the mind externally. Seeking within is exemplified in [teachings] like the Zen school's "directly pointing to the human mind, seeing one's true nature and becoming buddha" or Wang Yangming's *chih liang-chih* 致良知, "reaching innate knowledge or primordial awareness." Seeking externally is exemplified by seeking the basis of the mind in physiology, or researching it by looking into mental phenomena. Those who seek the mind within view it holistically, by way of synthesis; their shortcoming is that they lack precision. Those who seek the mind without view it by way of analysis; their shortcoming is that they fall into nit-picking (*hansai* 煩碎). When scholars today generally follow the western [way of] study, for the most part they seek the mind without, that is, they view it by the analytic method. Even though this method by far exceeds that of the east in precision of analysis, because it lacks a holistic grasp of the mind and a way to train it, there are many who have studied ten years [or more and still] do not know what the mind is.¹³

Nishimura's text has two significant implications for the project of defining philosophy in Japan. First, the author finds it necessary to use new language, reflective of western philosophical terms, to describe eastern as well as western thought. By his day many philosophical terms had translations that were to become standard, such as 分析 (analysis), 総合 (synthesis), and 現象 (phenomenon). At the time these terms were unusual enough to warrant notation in his text to set off neologisms, imported words, and particularly significant ideas. One term stands out for its bridging effect. Nishimura uses the classical word *kokoro* 心 to bridge "east" and "west" and equivocally signify both a classical Sino-Japanese array of concepts as well as western categories like "mind," "soul," "spirit," "*Gemüt*." In general, however, the introduction of the foreign discipline into Japan has changed the way that Japan's past is defined.

The second implication of Nishimura's contrast is that the two

13. *Jishiki roku* 自識録 (A Record of Self-knowledge) in *Meiji tetsugaku shisōshū*, 23.

approaches, eastern and western, are complementary. The western penchant for analysis achieves precision but fragments self-knowledge; the eastern predilection for synthesis achieves a more holistic view but lacks definition. Most notably, the east provides a way to train the mind, not merely to study it. Can the two approaches be combined to form a new direction in philosophy? If Nishimura considered the future development of philosophy open to a symbiosis of western and eastern achievements, however, his definition of philosophy precluded its extension back in time to cover traditional Japanese thought. In 1887 he had defined philosophy as the investigation of the truths of the universe and proclaimed that sage-ancestors, scriptures, and similar expedients have no part in it as they did in Confucianism and Buddhism.¹⁴ Philosophy did not rely on argument by authority.

The next year, 1888, Torio Koyata 鳥尾小弥太 (1847–1905) attempted to refute Nishimura’s exclusion: “Are not Confucianism and Buddhism investigations of truth? Is not the basis of knowledge and action 知行 also the basis of so-called truth?”¹⁵ Torio’s rebuttal, rhetorical as it is, highlights another contrast: the kind of thought against which philosophy was measured. We shall return to this point later.

The mirage of philosophy in the east

To embellish new western categories with a sprinkling of traditional terms was not enough for Miyake Setsurei 三宅雪嶺 (1860–1945), a critic not only of the overzealous westernizing of Meiji Japan but of casually claiming equivalencies between practices in the two great traditions, east and west. In his 1909 work on the universe, 宇宙, he attempted to synthesize eastern and western thought, but not before he proclaimed a vast difference between them. His *Philosophical Trifles* 哲学涓滴 of 1889 seems to heap his scorn not so much on the substance of “eastern philosophy” as on the practices associated with it: thoughtless philology and exegesis of what we call the classics of the east:

14. In his essay *Shitsugi* (Doubts), cited in Funayama Shin’ichi, “Nihon no kindai tetsugaku no hatten keishiki,” in Nishitani Keiji, ed., *Nihon no tetsugaku* (Kyoto: Yūkonsha, 1967), p. 67.

15. From *Nishimura shi shitsugi no shitsugi* (Doubts about Nishimura’s Doubts), cited in Funayama, 68.

We may place eastern philosophy beside western philosophy, but so far those who have made a practice of doing so have never inquired into the principles of the former. They have stopped short at commentary on every phrase of the old masters. When we casually start naming this “eastern philosophy” and expounding it today, we are dilettantes debating over tea the quaint doctrines of the ancients. Despite the name, there is no such thing as eastern philosophy...¹⁶

Miyake persists in using the term *tetsugaku* to refer to these texts, and describes the core of “Chinese philosophy” as feeling 情, that of “Indian philosophy” as intention or will 意, and that of “European philosophy” as knowledge or wisdom 知. But he also insists on identifying western philosophy with logical and causal investigations. This identification will prove crucial.

“No such thing as philosophy in Japan”

The tendency to find philosophy lacking in Japanese intellectual traditions culminated in the famous exclamation of Nakae Chōmin 中江兆民 (1847–1901): there is no such thing as philosophy in Japan. This inveterate advocate of liberal democracy, materialism, and atheism had studied philosophy in France in the early 1870s and was impressed with the creative and theoretical, even impractical force of the European discipline, unprecedented in traditional Japanese thought and unachieved by contemporary Japanese professors.¹⁷ For us today there is a threefold irony in Chōmin’s criticism. First, he lambastes Nativist, Neo-Confucian, and Buddhist thinkers as antiquarians who did not venture beyond textual exegesis or religious interpretation; but his own criticism is expressed in a traditional and now antiquated style. He uses expressions and categories that are now archaic, 天地生命の理, for example, to signify what we call the laws of nature. Secondly, he derides his contemporaries who were teaching philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University, Katō Hiroyuki and

16. Chapter four, part one, of *Tetsugaku kenteki*, reprinted in *Miyake Setsurei shū*, vol. 33 of *Meiji bungaku zenshū*, ed. Yanagida Izumi, Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1967. Also partially cited in Nakamura Yūjirō, *Nishida Kitarō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 1983), 13–14.

17. 一年有半 reprinted in *Nakae Chōmin zenshū*, vol. 10 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1983), pp. 155–6.

Inoue Tetsujirō, as elitist epigones, but today he is considered much less a philosopher than they. And thirdly he extols philosophy for giving a people profound insights beyond the practical world of trade and commerce; yet the importation of philosophy in his day was indeed related to commercial exchange. On the positive side, his criticism implies three distinctive features of “philosophy pure and simple”: it is the result of original translation, not a matter of importing doctrines as they are; it transcends practicality, and it give our life and actions their true meaning.

Soon after Chōmin’s exclamation, his fellow champion of liberalism, individualism and democracy, Tanaka Ōdō 田中王堂 (1867–1932), who had studied with George Herbert Mead and John Dewey at Chicago, suggested that one could find an indigenous Japanese philosophy distinct from Indian and Chinese thought.¹⁸ For the most part, however, Chōmin’s verdict went unchallenged until the appearance of Nishida Kitarō’s 善の研究 in 1911.

Nishida Kitarō as Japan’s first philosopher

As is well known, the reviewer and critic of Nishida’s book, Takahashi Satomi, proclaimed it in 1912 to be “the first, and only, philosophical work in post-Meiji Japan,” “overflowing with original thought.”¹⁹ Funayama Shin’ichi, the great historian of Meiji philosophy, echoed this verdict in 1959, noting that Nishida’s work moved philosophy “from the stage of the enlighteners 啓蒙家 to a stage of originality... Nishida was ultimately a metaphysician.”²⁰ Neither Takahashi nor Funayama was able structurally to define Nishida’s “originality” 獨創性. Funayama did imply, however, that since metaphysics—whatever that might be—was something entirely new to Japanese traditional thought, Nishida’s philosophy

18. Cited in Funayama, 66–7.

19. “Ishikigenshō no jijitsu to sono imi: Nishida-shi cho *Zen no kenkyū* o yomu” (“The Reality and Meaning of Phenomena of Consciousness: Reading Nishida’s *Study of Good*”) in *Takahashi Satomi zenshū* vol. IV (Tokyo: Fukumura Shuppan, 1973), 153–4; first published in *Tetsugaku zasshi* nos. 303 and 304.

20. *Meiji tetsugaku shi kenkyū* (Studies in the History of Meiji Philosophy) (Minerva Shobō, 1959), 33–4. See my article, “Tradition, Textuality, and the Translation of Philosophy: The Case of Japan,” in Charles Wei-hsun Fu and Steven Heine, eds., *Japan in Tradition and Postmodern Perspectives* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 228.

was novel. In 1977 Nishida's disciple Shimomura Toratarō, Nishida's disciple, attempted to define his teacher's innovation in terms of the previous history of Japanese thought, and again echoed the claim of Nishida's originality. He went further, however, proclaiming that Nishida became a model for grasping the "rigorous methods and concepts of western philosophy and yet possessing a distinctive eastern or Japanese originality." Nishida's philosophy, he implied, showed a "distinctive individuality" not only for being original and systematic but also for its "Japanese character."²¹ More recent and critical appraisals, Nakamura Yūjirō's, for example, continue to call Nishida Japan's first philosopher.²²

In our endeavor to define Japanese philosophy, what may we gather from these appraisals of Nishida's first book? What counted as truly philosophical thinking was innovative, not imitative; was systematic, not eclectic or fragmentary; was metaphysical, not practical or political; and finally, was distinctive for its Japanese flavor. For now we may bypass the questions whether Nishida's work really fit these descriptions, was innovative, not eclectic, and so forth; and whether the appraisals themselves are not an example of a reverse orientalism that would seek "a distinctive eastern or Japanese originality." The question I wish to pursue, rather, is this: what were the *linguistic* features of *philosophia* that made its practice seem so distinct from previous Japanese thought, that indeed have rooted it in particular traditions? And how might that practice be continued in differing traditions?

Philosophy as an idiom of translation.

Tetsugaku was part of a cultural complex, including western jurisprudence, natural sciences, and technology, that entered Japan in the late-Tokugawa and early-Meiji periods. These theoretical and applied disciplines were conveyed in languages foreign to the Japanese and obviously in need of translation. The very foreignness of the language of philosophy was a significant factor in the judgment that philosophy had

21. *Nishida Kitarō: Hhito to shisō* (Nishida Kitarō: The Person and his Thought) (Tokyo: Tōkai Daigaku Shuppankai, 1977), 197–8; 201. Publishers have not failed to capitalize on Nishida's reputation. The 1987 brochure announcing the third edition of the Complete Works, edited by Shimomura, proclaimed Nishida "in the growing estimation of the world, the foremost philosopher in modern Japan."

22. Nakamura Yūjirō, *Nishida Kitarō* (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten 1983), 20.

been lacking in Japan. Philosophy is usually considered abstract and theoretical by its very nature, a more or less universal form of thinking that transcends the bounds of particular languages. From a cultural perspective, however, we can see that philosophy is a practice that has changed cultures and—with the aid of particular technologies like the printing press—produced artifacts: books, journals, and other concrete forms of writing that cannot be abstracted from particular languages. Even if it is possible conceptually to separate the intended content of the thinking from its form, to distinguish the message from the medium or the proposition from the sentence, nevertheless the content, message or proposition is inevitably conveyed in one concrete language or another. When that language breaks in upon a culture whose own language historically lacks equivalent or similar terms and syntax, the content appears perplexing, even unintelligible.

This is precisely what happened when *philosophia* entered Japan. Once the Japanese language was transformed to include these new terms and methods of linking them, the way was opened for Japanese to practice *philosophia*. In its first stage this practice consisted in the massive project of translating terms and texts, either externally in the production of textual artifacts in the Japanese language, or internally in the process of reading and understanding texts in German, English, and French. If we recognize the creativity required to translate and convey an understanding of the foreign, we must regard the first generation of *tetsugakusha* as independent, innovative thinkers.

Some, like Inoue Tetsujirō, went on to reconstruct the philosophical idiom in earlier Japanese traditions, which came to be read anew, in a different light. He, too, was an innovator.

The breakthrough to philosophical originality that is ascribed to Nishida can also be seen as a matter of mastering a new idiom, as I have suggested in an earlier article.²³ This suggestion finds corroboration in a recent study of cultural innovations brought about through translation. The Belgian Japanologist W. F. Vande Walle proposes that Nishida's writing was enabled by a long and arduous process of transforming the Japanese language that began in the period of Dutch Studies (*rangaku*).

23. See my "Tradition, Textuality, and the Translation of Philosophy: The Case of Japan," *loc. cit.*

By the time Nishida was publishing his 善の研究, the Japanese language had already undergone a deep change, equipping it with a syntax that came much closer to that of western languages.... In a sense, in order to make translations of western works into Japanese faithful, the Japanese language had to mimic the source languages....

Nishida's accomplishment, he goes on, was in part "to write something that sounded convincingly like western philosophy."²⁴

Philosophy as a discipline embedded in cultures depends, has always depended, upon texts and their translation, as I have argued previously.²⁵ I call this condition of philosophizing the *textuality* of philosophy: texts (written and spoken) are the mediators of the philosophical endeavor. Similarly, I use the hyphenated term *trans-lation* to name the process of mediation by which texts convey philosophical methods, problems and terminology. Trans-lation occurs both within a natural language and between languages. These two terms describe the conditions under which the discipline of philosophy is necessarily practiced. *Trans-lation* as a term of definition draws attention to the fact that philosophy is a practice, an activity, of transmission and not merely a set of ideas or expressions. *Textuality* underscores the fact that this practice relies on concrete artifacts, linguistic texts, that have been handed down within traditions and communicated across them. These two conditions supplement the commonly recognized requisite that philosophy is dialogical, structured by *dialogue* either as the explicit style of a text or implicitly in the way one reads the texts by questioning them. These descriptive terms do not demarcate philosophy in content from other disciplines or practices, but rather assume that philosophy has an identity that is partly pre-formed and partly in continual formation. To define philosophy more fully, we

24. W. F. Vande Walle, in his Introduction to his edited volume, *Dodonaeus in Japan: Translation and the Scientific Mind in the Tokugawa Period* (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2001), 19–20, writes further that Nishida "is the first to have mastered the western philosophical idiom. His predecessors were still writing in a so-called antiquated style, exemplified by e.g. Nakae Chōmin.... Nishida's Japanese is much less tributary to that kind of style and approximates much better *honyaku-chō*, the style evolved during the Meiji period to translate English, German, and French original works of fiction and non-fiction."

25. In "Tradition, Textuality, and the Trans-lation of Philosophy: The Case of Japan," *loc. cit.*

will need to add descriptions of the content and methods more or less specific to it.

The interlocutors in the Meiji debate who were in the midst of a long process of trans-lation may not have appreciated how much the novel and seemingly unprecedented character of *philosophia* in their culture depended on the foreignness of its idiom. Their own dialogue with the European texts was limited by their relative lack of fluency in that idiom. They did, however, understand philosophy as a performance and an achievement. What might we learn from their perplexity and their endeavors? Nearly a century has passed since *philosophy* was recognized as something Japanese also do—at least insofar as they practice the European idiom. In our project to identify “Japanese philosophy” from eons before the Meiji transformation of language, it is now evident that another trans-lation is called for. Just as the Meiji translators had to create neologisms and distinctions, give old words new meanings, alter syntax—stretch the bounds of their language, in other words—part of what we do as translators of “Japanese philosophy” may well require the same kind of transformations of the target languages. I would caution, however, that too expansive a stretch can result in distortion rather than communication and easily undermine the attempt to develop Japanese philosophy as a direction of inquiry for the community of philosophers today.

FOUR SENSES OF “JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY”

A definition as a development of philosophy, as we have noted, proceeds from what is already given. Part of what is given in the project to define and develop Japanese philosophy is the term itself. But the term is ambiguous; it has had, I think, four principal meanings.²⁶ Following the Meiji-era critics who rejected the notion that Japan had philosophy, *Japanese philosophy* in one sense has come to mean philosophy in the European idiom as it happens to be practiced by Japanese scholars. These Japanese are for the most part professional philosophers in academic

26. I list the four meanings in two previous articles, “Contemporary Japanese Philosophy,” 810; and “The Ambiguous Legacy of Japanese Philosophy,” *Monumenta Nipponica* 57/3 (Autumn 2002): 349. The present section offers an expansion of that classification.

positions who analyze Plato, Kant, Heidegger, Rorty, and other “western” philosophers, and who develop critiques of their own. They can be as “original” as any other philosopher within the European idiom, and there is nothing peculiarly “Japanese” about what they do. An example of this meaning are the volumes whose titles refer to “Japanese phenomenology.”²⁷ If the Japanese authors’ names been omitted one would be hard-pressed to identify their heritage at all; the volumes could as well be titled *Phenomenology in Japan*. In their English translation, the chapters display no particular content or style would identify them as “Japanese.” The effort of the editors, of course, is to demonstrate that this branch of philosophy is truly international, and I surmise that the authors think of themselves as international philosophers who are representing their nation, if at all, only in the sense that it too has people who do legitimate philosophy. With few exceptions, such philosophers do not analyze or draw upon texts from Japanese traditions, and even where they might, they do not suppose that traditional Japanese sources are in themselves philosophical. The methods and the themes of philosophy must originate from the west. *Japanese philosophy* in this sense means simply philosophy of Greek-European vintage done by people in Japan.

At the other extreme, *Japanese philosophy* sometimes means traditional Japanese thought 思想, Confucian, Nativist, Buddhist, and so on, as it was formulated prior to the introduction of the European term and discipline. As long as this thought deals with ultimate reality or the most general causes and principles of things (terms used in the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of philosophy), it is considered philosophical. It may derive from or relate to Chinese thought but is uninfected by European philosophy. Examples of this usage are the titles of several works by Inoue Tetsujirō, *The Philosophy of the Ancient Learning School*, for instance. Inoue had been educated in the European philosophical idiom and engaged in a good deal of reconstruction to explicate the “philosophy” of the premodern Japanese schools, but he did so in the conviction that they themselves had genuinely philosophical thought. Although Inoue added

27. *Phenomenology: Japanese and American Perspectives* (Contributions to Phenomenology, v. 36), edited by Burt C. Hopkins (Dordrecht, Boston & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998), and *Japanese and Western Phenomenology* (Contributions to Phenomenology, vol 12), edited by Philip Blosser, Eiichi Shimomisse, and Lester Embree (Dordrecht, Boston & London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1993).

systematization and logical analysis to explicate the thought of these schools, he did not think he was transforming it into philosophy. It already was philosophical by virtue of addressing fundamental questions similar to those addressed in western philosophy. *Japanese philosophy* in this sense designates a kind of thought that is indigenous to Japan.

A third meaning admits that genuinely philosophical methods and themes are western in origin but allows them also to be applied to pre-modern, pre-westernized, Japanese thinking. People who practice Japanese philosophy in this sense understand it primarily as an endeavor to reconstruct, explicate, or analyze certain themes and problems that are recognizably philosophical when presented in a certain light. Works that refer to Dōgen's philosophy of being or of time, or Kūkai's philosophy of language, are examples of this meaning. It takes a "practiced hand" to identify the philosophical import of premodern writings; that is, it requires a reader who can engage texts in the light of modern philosophical terms and methods. That engagement may take the form of a more or less explicit dialogue between Anglo-European-style philosophy and the premodern Japanese text. But the questioning of the text might also merely imply modern philosophical presuppositions. A few philosophers in Japan allow the influence to work in both directions; they place themselves on both sides of the dialogue. They not only read traditional Japanese texts in light of modern philosophy but also use premodern concepts and distinctions to illuminate contemporary (western) philosophy and to propose alternative ways to solve modern or contemporary philosophical problems. An exemplary case of this sense of Japanese philosophy is Ōmori Shōzō's work to re-examine the relation between words and objects by re-interpreting *kotodama ron*. Yuasa Yasuo's reappraisal of the body-mind problem in the light of Japanese Buddhist texts is also well known.²⁸ But whether the contemporary work finds philosophy retrospectively in traditional Japanese thought, or in addition uses that thought as a resource for current philosophical practice, this work is distinguished by its interest in appropriation: making the Japanese tradition part of the broader tradition of philosophy today. *Japanese*

28. I summarize Ōmori's achievement and mention Yuasa's contribution in more detail in "Tradition, Textuality, and the Trans-lation of Philosophy: The Case of Japan," *Iloc. cit.*, 237–8.

philosophy in this third sense, then, means traditional and contemporary Japanese thought as appropriated for philosophizing today.

A fourth meaning of the term insists on qualities that explicitly oppose Japanese to non-Japanese philosophy. *Japanese philosophy* designates here a kind of thought that is not only relatively independent and innovative but has “a distinctive eastern or Japanese originality,” or a “Japanese character” as Takahashi Satomi and Shimomura Toratarō described Nishida’s accomplishment. Insofar as this meaning emphasizes a uniquely Japanese contribution to a field or a way of inquiry, it has been criticized as an instance of the reverse orientalism mentioned earlier: a valorization of Japan that identifies “things Japanese,” stereotypes differences from non-Japanese, and ignores historical variation. Insofar as this tendency is an ironic endeavor by some scholars to colonize Japanese thought, it is best treated in a consideration of the politics of defining philosophy. Here we may note that whether the criticism is justified or not, the attempt to identify distinctively Japanese elements in a philosopher’s thought most often proceeds by showing how he draws from but goes beyond his sources, which are notably both “western” and “eastern.” *Japanese philosophy* in this sense indicates an explicit attempt to create an original Japanese counterpart to modern Anglo-American-European philosophy.

It is the third sense of the term that best supports the project to define and anthologize Japanese philosophy. The first sense, Anglo-European philosophy as it happens to be practiced in Japan, delimits Japanese philosophy too strictly and belies the fact that philosophy has always undergone development under the influence of “non-philosophical” traditions. The second sense, referring to any traditional Japanese thought that addresses sufficiently fundamental questions, is uncritical. It lacks an awareness that its own usage is necessarily reconstructive: there is no identification of the “Japanese philosophy” of the past without some present application of the European term’s meanings.

The fourth sense, which restricts Japanese philosophy to original contributions with a distinctively Japanese flavor, is not only unnecessarily chauvinistic and partial but also myopic about the condition for any judgment of innovation and distinctive difference. Such comparative judgment depends on a deep knowledge of the dual sources of “western” and “eastern” thought, the very sources and the very distinction that are subject to questioning.

The third sense of *Japanese philosophy*, that is, Japanese thought as

appropriated for philosophizing today, has several advantages over the other common interpretations of the term:

1. It recognizes the specifically Greek origins of philosophy but also philosophy's expansion through the incorporation of non-philosophical sources, which may now include Asian sources.
2. It is critical and self-reflective, and acknowledges that the endeavor to identify past themes, problems, and methods as philosophical is necessarily reconstructive.
3. It understands philosophy as a enterprise still in the making, a continuation of the fundamental questioning and self-questioning that have always characterized its identity.

The disadvantage of the third sense is that it does not provide specific criteria by which one might select texts as appropriate for a sourcebook of Japanese philosophy. I will return to the problem of selection at the end of this essay. Here I would reiterate the suggestion that such criteria have to be drawn, in part at least, from the texts themselves. One standard criterion for identifying discourse as philosophical is that it proceed by reasoning. What is recognizable clearly as reasoning in the western idiom, however, may appear to be disguised or even absent in the discourse of other traditions. The challenge will be to uncover alternative forms and conceptions of reasoning, in the case of Japan, of 道理 and not just 論理. This challenge invites discussion (to be pursued on another occasion) of the questions of a "Japanese logic" and of the influence of the Japanese language on Japanese philosophy.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS: SOURCES OF AND SOURCES FOR PHILOSOPHY IN JAPAN

What is philosophy? This is a question for those of us who already know what it is, and yet don't know what it can be. I have argued that philosophy, if it is to break out of the circle of the Greek-European categories assumed in lexical definitions, cannot be defined in a statement that specifies its difference from other disciplines and forms of discourse. Rather than strictly delimiting philosophy, we can acknowledge its historical conditions and the context of our own interests today to develop

philosophy and allow it to continually re-define itself, as indeed Greek-European philosophy always has. Philosophy is forever in the making.

Controversy too has always been a mark of “western” philosophy and will be a part of any project to define and compile Japanese philosophy. My interpretation of the Meiji-era controversy about the nature of philosophy reveals two things:

1. Insofar as philosophy is inherently an ever-continuing and dialogical practice, it relies on texts and their transmission both within and across cultures and traditions. Textuality and translation form conditions of philosophy’s actuality.
2. The project of selecting and translating texts as examples of Japanese philosophy may well require some alteration of the target languages, both semantically and syntactically. Alteration, however, should serve the purpose of clear communication.

My interpretation of the usages of the term *Japanese philosophy* suggests for our project the expedient of appropriating texts in the light of questions, themes, and methods that have already been recognized as philosophical. “In the light of” can mean in dialogue with and in contrast to: The subject matter and the way of inquiry can be as significant for their divergence from recognized philosophical practices as it can be for their parallels. This expedient of appropriation assumes first, that philosophy in the making develops by forming contrasts and articulating alternatives, and secondly that it proceeds as much in our reading and questioning of the texts as within texts themselves.

There are, however, several caveats for our project. I would caution us to avoid reading into the various traditions in Japan an unexamined unity, some common denominator that would make them all “Japanese.” We should also be wary of reading the texts solely in the light of criteria that are foreign to them, and cautious of explaining differences in terms that already assume a privileged position. (An anecdote to exemplify this danger: A missionary in a Mid-eastern country, asked to explain the difference between true Christian beliefs and superstitions, replied, “Superstitions are the work of the devil.”) At the same time, we must, I think regard the identification of “Japanese philosophy” largely as a reconstructive project that may include “first-order” discourse about certain themes and well as “second-order” reflection upon such discourse. The reconstructive aspect of the project necessarily places old texts in a new context, under a purview with a precedent—the purview of *philosophy*.

I have identified the purview of philosophy as the very thing our project seeks to determine. We seek among texts, predominantly written documents in the case of Japan, that may offer an answer to our quest, which we undertake in an acute awareness of what already counts as philosophy. The challenge is to let the texts themselves provide criteria for identifying and developing philosophy.

If a *Sourcebook of Japanese Philosophy* is also to be a sourcebook *for* philosophy in the making, it will have to strike a balance between reading (pre-defined) philosophy into the texts and reading alternatives out of them, constructing contrasts to that philosophy. The following list is a very tentative attempt to give some examples of textual styles and contents to which we might look. Needless to say, the divisions are not necessarily exclusive or even oppositional, nor are they proper to one side (for example, western philosophy versus Japanese philosophy) alone.

Where the traditional sources *of* philosophy have thematically assumed a universal logic that is conducive to theoretical science pursued for its own sake, in search of reality changing according to fixed laws or of nature independent of human artifice, in service to knowledge that is objective and justifiable...

... the sources *for* philosophy in the making might also thematically entertain the possibility of cultural logics where propositions are not separable from linguistic expressions, reality is realizable, is what is actualized, and knowledge is practical and transformative, with natural and human creation intertwined.

Where the traditional the sources *of* philosophy have stylistically been

- reflective
- discursive
- analytical
- rational
- skeptical
- aiming for clarity and articulation through opposition
- seeking principles and deriving definite conclusions through sound inference or deduction...

... the sources for philosophy in the making might also stylistically be

- generative
- allusive

- relational
- syncretic
- seeking contextual origins and underlying obscurities
- using negations to reveal alternatives.

The very determination of philosophy, not only as it has been but as it can be, illustrates an alternative: If we say that philosophy has been x and not y, then in what space do we bring x and y together? The dis-discovery of this space is not necessarily a reduction of x and y to a common basis or principle; it must be an opening that makes room for both.