Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan. Harumi Osaki

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2019. Pp. xi-292

Dennis Stromback¹

Received: 29 August 2021 / Revised: 29 August 2021 / Accepted: 31 August 2021 /
Published online: 27 October 2021
© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2021

Reading Harumi's Osaki book *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan* is somewhat like watching Game of Thrones. Characters fade out of the story line; you forget about them, but then they come back with a vengeance. Osaki's aim is to revitalize an old argument centered around the political discourses of the Kyoto School during imperial Japan. This time, however, Osaki starts a war. The fundamental argument of the book is that the philosophy of the Kyoto School, more specifically, Nishida Kitarō's political, cultural, and metaphysical claims, as well as those made by several members of the second generation, provided a moral justification for the Japanese state to launch a new colonial order. We have seen this argument before, which created a stark divide among scholars in Japan studies. In one corner, we have Harry Harootunian and Yoko Arisaka insisting on this connection between the Kyoto School and Japanese colonialism. In the other corner, we see David Williams and Graham Parkes aggressively defending the Kyoto School from any attack that would suggest such a collusion. Osaki clearly received the baton from the former group. It should be noted that *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire* received high praise from Richard F. Calichman, one of the leading scholars on the wartime discourses, which makes this book all the more provocative. However, whether or not you are convinced by the argument after finishing the book may actually depend on another 'season' where former characters from a previous episode return for another battle for the Iron Throne.

Structurally, the book is divided into two parts: the first part deals with the political implications of the "Overcoming Modernity" and "The Philosophy of World History" discourses. The second part takes up the political and moral dimension of

✉ Dennis Stromback
dstromb3@gmail.com

¹ University of Minnesota Medical Center, Minneapolis, MN, USA

Nishida's philosophy. The first half, which is made up of six chapters, examines Kōsaka Masaaki's, Kōyama Iwao's, Suzuki Shigetaka's, and Nishitani Keiji's philosophical engagements with the wartime symposia and questions whether their view of national subjectivity "could become the agent for ethically transforming the Japanese wartime state or its military government, as recently claimed by some scholars" (19). In the second half of the book, which is also made up of six chapters, Osaki turns to Nishida Kitarō, who is seen as the mentor of these thinkers, and examines how his philosophical discourses "not only promoted ideas of a similar subjectivity, but also elaborated on a theory of the structure of the Japanese state that could condition the possibility of this subjectivity" (19). The entire book is based on reading the Kyoto School philosophy *as philosophy*, with the intent to chip away at the rift between politics and philosophy in order to make visible how the metaphysical theories referenced within the Kyoto School worked to reinforce the Japanese war machine.

Osaki begins part one with an investigation of Nishitani's involvement with the *Bungakukai* symposium. Based on his contribution to the roundtable discussion "Overcoming Modernity," Osaki maintains that the implications of Nishitani's thought helped drive belief in Japanese cultural and religious superiority, thereby furthering the nationalist energies already present at the symposia. In the following chapter, Osaki discusses the philosophy of world history as published in the *Chūōkōron* journal and contends that the thinkers participating in its roundtable "found it necessary to create a Japanese national subjectivity based on their grasp of the world-historical situation" (42). While the aim of these symposia was to theorize the position of Japan in world history as it relates to significant world-historical events, what they all shared in common, however, was a view of Japanese nationalist subjectivity that would assume world-historical responsibility. But what Osaki lays out in chapters three, four, and five were the kinds of characteristics that make up this Japanese national subjectivity and how they served to legitimize an "integration of plural states or ethnic groups under Japan's hegemony" (85). What are these characteristics? Osaki mentions three: a) the unity between the subject and the substratum of the state; b) a norm of responsibility that is both national and international; and c) a naturalization of mutual determination between the virtuality and the actuality of the state. In general, Osaki is not interested in uncovering the "real intentions" of these thinkers, but rather to assess their project of "overcoming modernity" in light of its wartime context.

Osaki goes for the jugular in Chapter 6. Here, she claims that Nishida's notion of absolute nothing underlies these three characteristics of Japanese national subjectivity, which sets in place the metaphysical and moral responsibility of "Japan to represent the East in its challenge to Western hegemony and to establish another hegemony under the pretext of creating a better world order" (103). The groundwork for mobilizing the citizenry for this end is at work here as well. According to Osaki, Japanese national subjectivity, as theorized by these thinkers, prepares citizens to participate in this political agenda with ardor because the *Volk* themselves would therefore have a moral responsibility to the Japanese state in terms of devoting themselves to its world-historical responsibility to overcome modernity. That is to say, the expectation is that subjectivity would undergo

an ethical “self-annihilation” in pursuit of liberating Asia from Western colonial rule. But this viewpoint is a façade, as Osaki argues, because “their attempt to overcoming modernity amounted to circumventing what they professed to overcome” (108). Despite criticizing the West for constructing a colonial order and deploying the state apparatus in the service of subjugating its own people, the discussions at the symposia would perpetuate the same evildoings. There is a large gap between the ideal of liberating Asia and the reality of Japan’s military and colonial policy in Asia. Furthermore, it is impossible to even know the intentions of these thinkers, especially if they failed to clearly articulate and resolve the contradictions of anti-imperialism and Japan’s own inclination to colonial invasion.

The second part of the book is even more interesting, albeit more controversial. The argument is one you would certainly recognize, where the political implications of Nishida’s logic of nothing is extracted and then tied to the Japanese war structure. How Osaki formulates this connection is by clarifying the link between Nishida’s thought and the contributions of the four participants at the symposia that were centered around Japanese national subjectivity. To demonstrate their continuity and how they overlap, Osaki first casts doubt on the claim that Nishida truly negates Japanese subjectivity and insist that the three characteristics underlying Japanese national subjectivity outlined at the wartime symposia has corresponding elements in Nishida’s own philosophy. For Osaki, Nishida is more or less ambiguous towards subjectivity. This amounts to re-introducing “the same old egoistic subject greedy for centrality or authority under the guise of the moral or ethical subject” (159). What is implicated in all of this is the *kokutai*. Osaki holds that Nishida did not conceive the Imperial Way and the structure of the Japanese state as separate, but rather complementary in the sense that the *kokutai* ends up becoming the epitome of his universalization of the particular. The result here is not only a call for obedience to state power in the name of the Emperor but a positioning of the Imperial Family at the center of the Japanese state. Occupying the seat of privilege in this new world order would therefore be the Japanese national subject because the center for the formation of the entire world is veiledly based on the idea of Japan existing as the spiritual embodiment of the place of absolutely nothing. What is established here is the idea that Japanese culture and spirituality is unique, providing a rationale for the Japanese subject to seek to envelop others for the sake of morality and peaceful co-existence.

Towards the end of the book, Osaki proposes that Nishida’s cultural philosophy is actually an inversion of Hegel’s. Nishida was critical of Hegel’s insertion of a cultural hierarchy, where Absolute spirit is located in Europe, and therefore invents a dialectic that transcends Being through a re-grounding of all cultural particulars within the place of absolute nothing. In other words, Nishida’s dialectic resists Hegel’s universalization of the West because it ends up positioning the universal as the affirmation of all particulars. So far so good. But what happens if the place of absolute nothing behaves like Hegel’s Absolute spirit? Or what if the place of absolute nothing smuggles in a quasi-latent being as part of its metaphysical function? Osaki claims that Nishida’s universalization of the particular fails to accomplish its principal task because it mimics Hegel’s Absolute spirit and the way it justifies the role and existence of the state. Osaki writes:

To the extent that Nishida thus makes absolute nothingness guarantee each state's divine authority over its members, he cannot escape from the criticism that he turned absolute nothingness into a quasi-latent being, inseparably binding it with the latent being of each state that regulates the behaviors of the citizens and negates their individualities. (236)

What Osaki is suggesting here, is that Nishida rehabilitates Hegel's hierarchical relations with an alternative concept that is situated between many cultural worlds. While Nishida believes his standpoint allows for an overcoming of modernity, it turns out that it is nothing more than a replacement of one system of domination for another system—one orchestrated by Japan.

Osaki's book is loaded with textual evidence, and from beginning to end, she does not shy away from advancing her claims and criticizing the Nishidians. The passion and enthusiasm permeating the text is felt at every turn, which makes the book an enjoyable read. Yet it also comes at a cost. In order for the argument to work, Osaki needs to maintain the stance that Nishida's logic of nothing supplies the raw materials for the participants at the symposia to rationalize Japanese uniqueness in its attempt to theorize and lead the overcoming of modernity. The evidence Osaki puts forth for this claim is worth digesting but it is also wanting. It is a convenient argument that all the participants at the symposia are following the footsteps of their master's intellectual contributions. However, is it really true that there is little difference in terms of their view of overcoming modernity? It is hard to say unless we fully parse out the other participants' intellectual work beyond what was stated in the transcripts at the symposia—which is something that does not take place in the book. If anything, Osaki takes a dogmatic reading of Nishida and the participants' contribution at the symposia, instantiated by her translation of Nishida's concept of *zettai-mu no basho* (絶対無の場所). Osaki translates this as “absolute nothingness,” which is a common (mis)translation (in my view), but again, this is convenient for the argument she is making. By rendering a non-objectifiable place into a noun, Osaki can convince the reader that Nishida's “absolute nothingness” works like Hegel's Absolute spirit. In Osaki's mind, Nishida's place of absolutely nothing is a disguised substantive entity, which is why his philosophy is complicit with Japanese colonialism. But if we interpret Nishida's place of absolutely nothing more in line with the logic of *soku-hi*—where A is not A, therefore, it is A—then it is harder to make the connection that Nishida's dialectics are a bad imitation of Hegel's. In the end, Osaki commits what Nishida would consider to be the ultimate error in reading his philosophy: substantializing what cannot be substantialized. Needless to say, we cannot deny the resemblances between Nishida's and Hegel's cultural and political philosophy—after all, Nishida was a Hegelian. But we also cannot deny that Nishida re-interprets Hegel to formulate a view of the historical world that is not centered in Europe. And if that is not cultural resistance, then I do not know what is.

The point here is that there are more nuances to all of this. When we search for the devil in the details, we will find that Nishida's concept of the global world (*sekaiteki sekai* 世界の世界) can in fact be mined for a co-operative resistance against colonialism and Eurocentric dominance. Osaki is certainly right, Nishida and the four participants made some cultural and political fumbles, which unwittingly lent their

work to be read as nationalistic. However, the biggest mistake Nishida himself made was that he did not go far enough in theorizing resistance. Of course, such a misstep is unforgivable. This is not to say that Osaki's book is not worth reading. On the contrary, anyone interested in this controversy haunting the Kyoto School should read this bold and ambitious text. Osaki is an excellent hermeneuticist, but excellent hermeneuticists do read theoretical points out of context from time to time to further their agenda. Therefore, it is wise to directly read the discussions at the symposia alongside reading *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire* to fact check her work. Either way, Osaki's book will definitely make a splash, and for those following this series, rest assured that the drama that will unfold as a result of this work will be fascinating to watch.

Reference

- Osaki, H. (2019). *Nothingness in the Heart of Empire: The Moral and Political Philosophy of the Kyoto School in Imperial Japan*. State University of New York Press.