

## Philosophy in Japan after WWII

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### 1. Questions of the history of philosophy

Philosophy is an answer to philosophical questions. The history of philosophy is a history of philosophical questions and answers. Therefore, we can divide questions concerning the history of philosophy into the following:

“What were the primary philosophical questions, and how did they change?”

“What were the answers to the primary philosophical questions, and how did they change?”

### 2. What were the primary philosophical questions in the wider sense in Japan?

After the Meiji Restoration, the most important questions for philosophy in Japan and Japanese society were the following two questions. (These might be common questions for other nonwestern countries as well.)

“What is modern Western society (and its philosophy)?”

“What should be our attitude toward modern Western philosophy?”

In Japanese universities, courses on Chinese Philosophy and Indian Philosophy are taught. However, researchers into Western philosophy constitute an overwhelming majority. Questions concerning Western philosophy were very important for Japan after the Meiji Restoration. Their importance continued after WWII.

#### (1) What constitutes modern Western society and its philosophy?

Researching the history of Western philosophy is the main subject of philosophers in Japan. This has not changed from the Meiji period to the present. There is a huge amount of accumulated research on each great Western philosopher. (It is a frequent criticism that many researchers do not research philosophy itself but, rather, the history of philosophy.)

With regard to the next question (2), the characteristics of modern Western society are understood to be individualism, democracy, capitalism, rationalism, and science and technology.

#### (2) How should we respond to modern Western society and its philosophy?

To put this question another way, how should we address the characteristics of modern Western society? Answers to this question are divided into the following three schools of thought:

- ① Modernism
- ② Reactionism (Asian thought, Japanese thought)
- ③ Marxism

① People who approve of Western principles seek to promote them in Japan, because these principles are undeveloped in Japan. They are often referred to as “modernist”.

② In order to oppose these Western principles, people need an alternative principle. An example in this regard is offered by Asian or Japanese thought. People often criticize Western individualism, capitalism, and science and technology, and want to restore an Asian or Japanese collective mentality, traditional values, and norms. As a recent example, there is a movement now to review traditional modes of agriculture, lifestyles, and view of nature in order to resolve environmental problems.

③ Another main school of thought criticizing modern Western principles is Marxism. Marxism regards the most essential characteristic of modern Western society to be capitalism.

Before WWII ① and ② were the main philosophies, while after WWII ① and ③ prevailed. The political right-wing took Asian or Japanese thought as the main principle. Of course the principle of the political left-wing was Marxism. Champions of ① were mainly social scientists (e.g., Marunayam Masao, Otsuka Hisao). ② was rarely expressed theoretically after WWII (e.g., Umehara Takeshi).

### **(3)Change of the primary philosophical questions**

However, the situation changed significantly around 1990, due to the following two events: the end of the Cold War in 1989 and the bursting of the economic bubble in Japan in 1991.

③ The influence of Marxism declined with the end of the Cold War. This grand story of our world history has come to an end.

① Modernists thought that Europe or the United States provided the models we should emulate. However, these models lost their persuasiveness, somewhat, when Japanese society caught up with these western regimes during the period of the economic bubble, and Europe and the United States were no longer regarded as models for resolving the problems of Japan. Of course, with regard to individual issues, institutions, and culture, Europe and the United States still offer models for Japan. However, Europe and the United States are not appropriate models for Japanese society as a whole. The western model, which has persisted to relatively recently from before the Meiji Restoration, has lost some of its luster.

② Reactionism has also lost some of its attraction. In the period of the economic bubble, people’s confidence was boosted – albeit temporarily – and a “return to Japanese culture” was proposed. However, the era of globalization started after the economic bubble burst and this way of thinking ceased. It was obvious that we could not respond to globalization with only traditional Japanese thought and culture.

After 1990, ①, ②, and ③ no longer constituted acceptable answers to questions of philosophy. At the same time, the question of “How should we respond to modern Western society and its philosophy?” began to lose its importance for Japan. The following two questions appeared instead.

“What is globalization?”

“How should we respond to globalization?”

Next, I turn to the history of philosophy in the narrow sense after WWII.

### **3. An overview of the history of philosophy in the narrow sense after WWII**

The history of philosophy in Japan after WWII can be divided by the year 1990. We could say that we moved from the era of the Europe and the United States model to the era of globalization.

#### **(1) The first period: before 1990 (the era of the Cold War and economic growth)**

Philosophical research was basically subdivided into three kinds.

① Existentialism (→ structuralism and phenomenology → post-structuralism)

② Marxism (theory of alienation → theory of reification)

③ Analytic philosophy

##### **① Existentialism**

The existentialism of Sartre and Beauvoir had an impact as huge as the existential literature of Camus and Kafka. Research into existentialism moved toward studies of the phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, the hermeneutics of Heidegger, and French structuralism in the 1970s, and moved further to focus on post-structuralism and post-modernism in the 1980s. This mode of thought lost currency after the economic bubble burst. (In this field, Maruyama Keizaburo created an original semiotic anthropology and Ichikawa Hiroshi formulated his phenomenological theory of the body.)

##### **② Marxism**

In Marxism we find a development from the controversy over subjectivity, through the theory of alienation (*Entfremdung*), to the theory of reification (*Versachlichung*). (This will be explained later.)

##### **③ Analytic philosophy**

Following the first generation working in this field (e.g., Ichii Saburo, Nakamura Syukichi, etc.), Omori Shozo constructed his original philosophy. He developed an epistemology and ontology called '*the monism of appearance (Tachiaraware ichigen ron)*' which is a kind of neutral monism opposed to dualism mind and matter. He also claimed a unique theory of time called '*the theory of the past as memory*,' which argues that the past doesn't exist objectively and is only our memory at the moment. He was an analytic philosopher but his claim seems to be close to Buddhist monism.

#### **(2) The second period: the era of globalization**

##### **(After the Cold War and the economic bubble burst)**

The noteworthy feature of this period is the strong influence of British and American philosophy, such as analytic philosophy and political philosophy.

##### **① Changes in practical philosophy**

##### **(From Marxism to the theory of justice and applied ethics)**

Marxism lost its currency after the end of the Cold War, but no grand social theory appeared to replace it. Therefore, the philosophy of society itself declined in this period. Instead of a grand theory, the theory of justice, applied ethics, environmental

thought, gender studies arose to address individual issues. Major theories and scholars are as follows:

- Theory of justice (Inoue Tatsuo)
- Theory of responsibility (Ohoba Takeshi, Takahashi Tetsuya)
- Bioethics (Kato Hisatake)
- Environmental thought (Kato Hisatake)
- Gender studies (Ueno Chizuko)
- History of Japanese philosophy after the Meiji Restoration (Fujita Masakatsu)
- < after 2000 >
- Ethics of engineers (Kobayashi Denji)
- Clinical philosophy (Washida Seiichi, Nakaoka Narihumi)
- Theory of subcultures (Miyadai Shinji, Azuma Hiroki)
- Globalization (Karatani Kojin)

## ② Changes in theoretical philosophy

### (From epistemology to metaphysics)

The second generation of researchers into analytic philosophy began to energetically publish their work. The younger generation of researchers shifted from analytic philosophy, due to the impact of the second generation. Their interest moved from epistemology to semantics and metaphysics, including the following:

- Philosophy of language (Iida Takashi, Yamada Tomoyuki)
- Philosophy of science (Todayama Kazuhisa)
- Metaphysics (Nagai Hitoshi, Noya Shigeki, Irifuji Motoyoshi)

This is a comprehensive overview of philosophy in Japan after WWII. I would also like to explain one additional aspect of philosophy in Japan after WWII.

## 4. What was the main philosophical question in Japan after WWII?

We can answer this by saying that an important question involved that concerning the relationship between self and society or self and other. It is a question that has retained our philosophical interest after WWII.

### (1) The Controversy of Subjectivity

Philosophical research started with the so-called “controversy of subjectivity” (1946-1950) after WWII. This controversy concerned the following questions.

“How does a human (subject, self) relate to society?”

“How does the freedom of individuals relate to the historical determinism of Marxism?”

The background to the controversy included the notion that people wished to confirm themselves as modern, with modern subjectivities, because of their regret that they had been subjects of an imperial state that had provoked an aggressive and invasive war.

### (2) From the controversy of subjectivity to the theory of alienation

Focus shifted from the subjectivity controversy to Marxism. Some Marxists were critical of dogmatic communism in the Soviet Union, prompting them to formulate “subjective Marxism”, which attached a high value to subjectivity or the freedom of individuals. This line of thought emphasized the theory of alienation in Marx’s text “The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts” (e.g., Shirozuka Noboru, Fujino Wataru, and Shimizu Shotoku). They thought it possible to make a unified explanation of the subjectivity of individuals, and the necessary social changes in historical terms, based on the theory of alienation.

### **(3) Hiromatsu’s theory of reification and theory of four-branched structure**

Hiromatsu Wataru (1933-1994) criticized the theory of alienation and developed the theory of reification. The theory of alienation is based on “human essence”, while the concept of “subject” belongs to modern philosophy, such as Hegelianism. Instead of this, Hiromatsu understood that the so-called “human essence” is the reification of the aggregate of social relations. He thought that Marx’s theory of reification went beyond modern philosophy.

Hiromatsu developed the theory of reification and created his original philosophical system, i.e., “the theory of the four-branched structure,” in his books “Sekai no Kyodo Shyukanteki Sonzai Kouzou (*The Intersubjective ontological structure of the world*)” (1972), and “Sonzai to Imi (*Being and Meaning*)” vol. 1 (1982), vol. 2 (1993).

According to Hiromatsu, epistemology in modern philosophy has a three-branched scheme.

<an object -- representation -- subject>

However, he thought that this scheme has the following two faults.

- It cannot explain how to know other minds.
- It leads us to an agnosticism of things themselves.

He claimed the following. The four-branched structure is fundamental. An object (o) is always known as something (O) and a subject (s) always knows as somebody (S). Such a four-branched structure (s (as S) knows o (as O)) was extended also to the theory of action. Finally he claimed the ontological “priority of relations” instead of the “priority of substance”.

### **(4) Impact of Hiromatsu: theory of other minds**

Due to the influence of Hiromatsu, many researchers, mainly phenomenologists, tried to answer the question “How do we know others’ minds” in the 1970s and 1980s. Researchers of German Idealism began to investigate of theory of recognition of Hegel and Fichte. This constituted a clear movement in this period. However, the argument of I! by Nagai has changed this movement.

### **(5) The ontology of I! by Nagai**

Nagai Hitoshi (1951-) developed the ontological argument about the I!, which is incomparable to other persons, in “<Watashi> no Keijijohgaku (*Metaphysics of I!*)” (1986), “<Watashi> no Sonzai no Hiruinasa (*Incomparableness of the existence of I!*)” (1998), and his other books. His argument had an impact on the younger generation. Nagai used ‘I!’ to express his original understanding of the incomparable existence that “I” refers to. The I!, Nagai claimed, does not refer to selves or persons, such as a particular person called “Nagai Hitoshi”. According to Nagai, it is contingent that I! is

Hitoshi Nagai and it is possible that I! is a different person. His claim caused many disputes and has had the following impacts.

## **(6) Impacts from Nagai**

### **① From epistemology to semantics and metaphysics**

The previous argument about other minds was an epistemological approach mainly based on phenomenology, but Nagai's argument of other minds and I! consists of a semantic or metaphysical approach. Thus, theoretical philosophy moved from epistemology to semantics.

### **② From the theory of other minds to the theory of self**

Nagai's argument led other researchers to shift their focus from the "other mind" to the "self"; consequently, much research on the "self" or "I" appeared (e.g., Ohba Takeshi, Washida Seiichi, etc).

### **③ Wide Impact on the young generation**

Nagai's argument of I! had an impact not only on researchers of philosophy but also more widely, especially on the younger generation.

If the problem which forces me to deliberate might have sometimes moved people, then the awareness of the miracle that they exist actually might cause the feeling of value, which is in a different dimension from the usual secular value (Nagai "<Kodomo> no Tetsugaku (*Philosophy for a Child!*)" 1996).

Social competition has become extremely tough due to globalization after the 1990s, and young people who cannot communicate well with others and withdraw from schools, companies, or neighborhoods, and stay inside private rooms are increasing. Such a generation has created a unique subculture called the "Otaku" culture. Nagai's argument seems to be accepted by this generation.

## **(6) Results**

The characteristics of Nagai's argument emphasize the incomparability of I!, therefore it seems to approximate to solipsism. However, it does not. His argument has a structure by which one is unable to reach I! without referring to other minds. Therefore, Nagai's argument also places a focus on the relations between self and others. Many other philosophers of "self" or "I" also take relations between self and others as a central theme.

This line of discussion, which continues from "the controversy of subjectivity" to Nagai, is an endeavor to answer the question: "How do I relate to others?" The continuity of strong interest in this problem can be said to be an important feature of philosophy in Japan after WWII.