THE GERMAN IDEALIST CONCEPTION OF FREEDOM IN MODERN JAPANESE PHILOSOPHY: A SURVEY

Dennis PROOI[1]

Abstract

This paper surveys the transmission of the German idealist conception of freedom to Japan during the Meiji period and explores its significance to the subsequent development of the Kyoto School of Philosophy. My discussion focuses on, first, mapping the context in which Kiyozawa Manshi first adopted the German idealist conception of freedom; second, showing how Tosaka Jun criticized Nishida philosophy as a disguised form of German idealism; and third, considering Nishitani Keiji's rejection of the conception of freedom found in Western existentialism in favor of a conception anchored in Nishida philosophy. I show how none of these three philosophers rejects liberalism in toto*, but how they reject one form to adopt another.*

Keywords: freedom, liberalism, Kyoto School, Kiyozawa Manshi, Tosaka Jun, Nishitani Keiji.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2024/20/1.04

1. Introduction

In documenting the transmission of liberalism to Japan, scholarship has hitherto generally focused on the reception of the Anglo-American conception of freedom by modernizing intellectuals such as Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), Nakamura Masanao (1832-1891), and Katō Hiroyuki (1836-1916). In his classic study on Nishi Amane (1829-1897) – another prominent modernizer well-known for introducing philosophy to Japan – Thomas Havens approvingly cites Mikiso Hane's dissertation as demonstrating that "England was the chief model for many Japanese reforms and was the predominant source for 'enlightened' thought in the early Meiji era" (Havens, 1970: 53-54). This first generation of intellectuals active in the *early* Meiji period (1868-1912) was however followed by a second generation that over the course of the 1880s and 1890s increasingly turned to the German idealist conception of freedom. The fortunes of this alternative conception of freedom in modern Japanese thought has however received much less scholarly attention – an oversight this paper seeks to begin to correct. Doing so is important, for the German idealist conception of freedom would, as I show, go on to become normatively guiding in the thinking of certain key members of the so-called "Kyoto School of Philosophy", which came to dominate Japanese thought over the course of the first half of the 20th century and remains much-discussed today.

---

[1] Dennis Prooi, The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, dennisprooi@gmail.com

What I offer in this paper is a survey of three moments in modern Japanese philosophy in which the German idealist conception of freedom is involved either in denouncing other conceptions of freedom or itself subject to criticism in favor of an alternative. These three moments are, first, Kiyozawa Manshi’s (1863-1903) challenge, in his 1902 *The Cultivation of Spirit* (*Shinrei no Shūyō*), to the Anglo-American conception of freedom as it was adapted to the Japanese context by the intellectuals of the early Meiji period; second, Tosaka Jun’s (1900-1945) critique, as worked out in his 1935 *The Japanese Ideology* (*Nihon Ideorogīron*), of the manner in which so-called “Nishida philosophy” (*Nishida tetsugaku*) – the original philosophy of Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), the foremost representative of the Kyoto School – crafted a realm of meaning into which freedom could be projected at the expense of the practical concern with freedom in material reality; and third, Nishitani Keiji’s (1900-1990) rejection of the “subjective freedom” expounded by Western philosophy – existentialism in particular – in favor of an understanding of freedom deeply anchored in Nishida philosophy and, by implication, its German idealist conception. We shall see how Kiyozawa, Tosaka, and Nishitani have in common that they do not reject liberalism *in toto*, but merely one form of liberalism in favor of another. They can accordingly all be classified as “liberal philosophers” – the issue is how to qualify their liberalism.

These three moments, which I work out in what follows, are by no means unconnected. Although Kiyozawa is active prior to the emergence of the Kyoto School – which came about in the late 1920s as Nishida and Tanabe Hajime (1885-1962), successive incumbents of the chair of philosophy at Kyoto University, each began to work out their own logic – he can by my lights be considered its precursor. In fact, Nishitani has no scruples about identifying Kiyozawa as one of his inspirations[2], and it is clear that Nishida was to a certain degree influenced by him as well[3]. Nishitani is Nishida’s student, and they were both familiar with Tosaka’s work, which was critical of theirs, and Nishida’s in particular. While Tosaka is himself often considered a representative of the “left wing” of the Kyoto School, it should be kept in mind that he was one of the first to use the name “Kyoto School,” not merely to describe what was forming around Nishida and Tanabe as they developed their respective logics, but more importantly to problematize its bourgeois character.

I have made use of existing translations into English of passages from the works of Nishida, Tosaka, and Nishitani cited below. In the case of Kiyozawa’s *The Cultivation of Spirit*, the translations are my own.

---

[2] See the introduction to Kiyozawa, 2022.

[3] See Fujita, 2003.

2. Kiyozawa: The Cultivation of Spirit

In setting out to modernize Japan, the first generation of Meiji-era intellectuals concerned itself with the importation, study, and adaptation to the Japanese context of the Anglo-American conception of freedom. The two British philosophers who were primarily used for this purpose were J. S. Mill (1806-1873) and Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). The former, whose *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1861) remain widely read, was popularized among his Japanese audience through the efforts of Nishi Amane and Nakamura Masanao, among others. Nishi had studied at Leiden University between 1862 and 1865, and although there he received some instruction in the work of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) – whose critical philosophy prompted the formation of German idealism – he ultimately strongly inclined towards the utilitarianism of Mill and the positivism of Auguste Comte (1798-1857) (Havens, 1970: 54-56). Since Nishi's Mill was not the Mill of *On Liberty* – which he had perhaps not even read – but the Mill of the 1843 *A System of Logic*, in Japan Mill came to be strongly associated with the study of logic (Havens 1970: 103). It was Nakamura who, upon returning from London in 1868 (having gone there two years earlier), translated *On Liberty* as *Jiyū no Ri* (1871), thereby cementing Mill as a major source of Meiji-era thinking about freedom (Hane, 1969a: 265).

In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Spencer – who by now has faded into relative obscurity but was one of the most celebrated thinkers of his time – began to rise in prominence in Japan, overtaking Mill in popularity. His impact was much more ambiguous than Mill's, leading some to speak of a "dual use"-theory of Spencer's appropriation in Meiji-era Japan (Godart, 2016: 59), which is to say that he could be used both to defend liberalism and individualism, and to challenge these using his organic theory of society. Spencer's contradictory appropriation may well have been the result of his reception coinciding with the decline in the popularity of liberalism and the rise of conservatism over the course of the 1880s[4]. In the popularization of Spencer, translation was again instrumental. Liberal activists were responsible for translations of *Social Statics* (1851), first in abbreviated form in 1877 and subsequently in full in 1882. By contrast, Katō Hiroyuki—who broke with his earlier liberalism in 1881 (Hane, 1969b: 364-365) – drew on Spencer to advocate his conservative view of society as "the stronger eat the weaker" (*kyōniku jakushoku*), which is to say, the survival of the fittest (a phrase that, coincidentally, first occurs in Spencer's 1864 *Principles of Biology*).

What the first generation has in common – whether it concerns more progressive supporters of Mill, such as Nakamura and Fukuzawa, or more conservative followers of Spencer, such as the later Katō – is that they appropriated the Anglo-American conception of freedom only to argue that in the Japanese context freedom ought to be restricted in some way.[5] Given that they based themselves on Mill and Spencer, this is not without a degree of irony. After all, through Isaiah Berlin, Mill has become associated with the idea of so-called “negative freedom”, or freedom as the absence of interference (Berlin, 1969: 123-124). In *On Liberty*, Mill puts forward what has become known as the “harm principle,” according to which freedom may only ever be restricted to prevent harm, and never for the sake of a person’s “...own good, either physical or moral” (Mill, 2003: 94-95). In a similar vein, in *Social Statics* Spencer argues that “Every man has freedom to do all that he wills, provided he infringes not the equal freedom of any other man” (Spencer, 2003: 55). Against this, in the 1868 *Rikken Seitairyaku* – one of the works from his early liberal period – Katō comments, for example, that the “right to liberty does not permit arbitrary writing. If writing gravely corrupts the heart or damages peaceful rule, it is certainly appropriate that the writer receive his due punishment” (Howland, 2002: 100). Nakamura and Fukuzawa similarly argue that true freedom must always be restricted, condemning the freedom to do as one wills as false (Howland, 2002: 106-107). In the Japanese context, the Anglo-American conception of freedom is thus, contrary to what Mill and Spencer originally envisioned, restricted in scope well beyond the harm principle. True freedom, the first generation of Meiji intellectuals agreed, implies limitation.

---

[4] See also Hane, 1963: 71.

[5] See also the argument in Howland, 2002: 106.

That same generation paved the way for the emergence of its own critics by establishing Japan’s modern institutions, including those of higher learning. Kiyozawa was trained at Tokyo University, in the founding of which in 1877 Katō had been involved (he would go on to serve as its president between 1890 and 1893). That Kiyozawa was able to challenge the conception of freedom of his predecessors was in no small part due to the employment by the University of Tokyo of foreign lecturers, who were instrumental in the spread of the German worldview as it had developed over the course of the 19th century. In the last three decades of the same, that worldview had made significant inroads into Anglo-American philosophy, which had traditionally been highly resistant to German forms of thinking. Whereas Spencer had been unwilling to entertain any German philosophers other than Kant, during those decades a new form of English idealism began to dominate the British universities. Its representatives – F. H. Bradley (1846-1924) and Bernard Bosanquet (1848-1923) in Great Britain and Josiah Royce (1855-1916) in the United States – were deeply influenced by German idealism[6]. With a German intellectual wind blowing in the Anglo-American world, it comes as no surprise, then, that Kiyozawa’s American teacher Ernest F. Fenollosa (1853-1908) valued G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831), arguably the most significant among the German idealist philosophers, at least as much as Spencer[7]. Fenollosa was to have a formative influence on his students at Tokyo University, who through him were exposed to the German worldview, and began to draw on it to challenge the views of the intellectuals of the early Meiji period.

---

[6] For a detailed study, see Mander, 2011.

[7] For more on Fenollosa, see the account in Godart, 2017: 32-37.

In his 1902 *The Cultivation of Spirit*, we find Kiyozawa employing the German idealist conception of freedom to target the conception of freedom developed by his predecessors. To begin with, that earlier conception to Kiyozawa is underpinned by a deeply mistaken metaphysics. He writes:

> *"Independence and liberty"* (dokuritsu jizai) *and "autonomy and freedom"* (jishu jiyū) *truly sound alluring. We strive for their realization. Be that as it may, we should not seek to realize them merely because of their allure. Observe the self's actual condition. Do we not exist in constant dependence on the things and people that surround us? Especially in the case of us living things, we exist in extremely tight-knit relationships with other people. It is by no means possible for us to in the midst of this dependence find any room for declaring ourselves independent and autonomous*. (Kiyozawa, 1953: 289, vol. 6)

Part and parcel of liberalism as a political doctrine is the assumption that there are individuals who have rights (Manent, 1995: xvi). Kiyozawa thinks that this doctrine is false on metaphysical grounds: since there are no "individuals," they cannot be said to have "rights" either. The idea of the individual – adopted as well by the first-generation Meiji intellectuals – is that of a self-contained social unit, but there are no such units. Instead, in society, everyone depends on everyone else. Against this view, Kiyozawa puts forward the Buddhist metaphysics of dependent origination, which holds that all phenomena are selfless in the sense that any phenomenon is not what it is because of itself, but because of its relationship with all other phenomena[8]. Declaring there to be "individuals" who are "independent" and "autonomous" or "self-determining" flies in the face of this metaphysics, since it holds that, at least among phenomena, there is no self that could independently determine itself to begin with: all phenomena are, if anything, other-determined or other-constituted[9].

Kiyozawa's rejection of political liberalism on metaphysical grounds should not be taken to imply his rejection of liberalism *in toto* – what he is doing instead is rejecting one form of liberalism in favor of another. This is clear from the following:

> *If the former is the case, then are "independence and liberty" and "autonomy and freedom" not utter delusions? By no means! To the contrary: we greatly emphasize the ideals of independence and autonomy. [...] We are by no means beings who are limited to the present. We are beings who aspire to significant future development. We should aspire to attain the viewpoint of the unlimited absolute* (zettai mugen).

---

[8] *The Cultivation of Spirit* is a text from Kiyozawa's so-called "spiritualist" period in which he is more concerned with practice than with metaphysics. For my reconstruction of Kiyozawa's metaphysics in this paper, I rely on his 1895 *Draft for the Skeleton of a Philosophy of Other-Power* (*Tarikimon Tetsugaku Gaikotsu Shikō*), which I take to be representative of his mature metaphysics. For Kiyozawa's acceptance of the doctrine of dependent origination in that text, see Kiyozawa, 1953: 402, vol. 4.

[9] I borrow the idea of "other-constitution" from Eric S. Nelson; see Nelson, 2020: 8.

Our ideal should be to find peace in the highest realm of independence and liberty. (Kiyozawa, 1953: 289-290, vol. 6)

What Kiyozawa contests is the metaphysical status of freedom in the case of beings who dwell in the realm of phenomena, such as ourselves. Since we subsist in relations of mutual dependence, to us freedom is not a *reality*. Rather, it is an *ideal* towards which we strive. This ideal is directly reality only to what Kiyozawa calls the “unlimited absolute.” Since the unlimited absolute is not a phenomenon but that which transcends the phenomena to be the all-encompassing womb first making them possible, it is what is truly independent and self-determining – that is, what can genuinely be called “free.” After all, if this unlimited absolute were dependent on something outside of it – that is, if it were not all-encompassing—it would neither be unlimited (because there would be something beyond it that would not fall under its scope) nor absolute (because it would be relative to what transcends it).[10] By definition the unlimited absolute must be what determines itself, since there is nothing that lies beyond it by which it could be determined. For Kiyozawa, if what we seek are such liberal ideals as “independence” and “autonomy,” it is accordingly with the unlimited absolute – and nowhere else – that they may be found. This is why he argues we should hope to attain its viewpoint, because only by aligning ourselves with that viewpoint – by adopting, so to say, its standpoint – can we ourselves ever hope to be “free” in the *true* sense of that term.

The unlimited absolute that Kiyozawa here posits as his ideal is unmistakably German idealist in origin. Coming to this point, a brief sketch of the way in which the absolute comes to take on a self-determining nature in German philosophy is in order. In *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), René Descartes (1596-1650) defines substance as what exists without depending on something else (1984: 210). From this definition Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) in his *Ethics* (1677) concludes what Descartes in fact already appears to have realized himself, namely that there can then only be one substance. This substance – which Spinoza refers to as “God” – is the “free cause of all things,” and yet “acts solely from the necessity of his own nature” (Spinoza, 2018: 35). That is, while God is himself not caused by anything else and as such undetermined by prior causes, what we call “creation” flows forth from him based on the iron law of efficient causality. This utter lack of freedom in God’s creation is what German idealism, particularly as it passes through the hands of Schelling and Hegel, seeks to remedy[11]. Hegel reconceives Spinoza’s substance as subject, that is, as what is not tied to its own internal necessity but fully self-determining (Hegel, 2018: 12-13). Clearly, Kiyozawa’s “unlimited absolute” is a species of this kind of self-determining substance – one of which I surmise he was first introduced to by his teacher at the University of Tokyo, Fenollosa.

---

[10] The source for this *reductio*-style argument, again, is *The Skeleton of a Philosophy of Other-Power*. See Kiyozawa, 1953: 398-399, vol. 4.

[11] For Hegel in this regard, consider the account in Moss, 2020: 489.

While Kiyozawa's "unlimited absolute" finds its inspiration in Schelling and Hegel, the view that freedom is an ideal towards which we strive is most likely Fichtean in origin. One of the innovations that occurs in German philosophy as Kant's transcendental idealism is taken up by J. G. Fichte (1762-1814) is to regard freedom, which according to Kant cannot be an object of experience (2000: 3), as an ideal. Fichte follows Kant – and in a sense Spinoza – in viewing nature as necessary, but argues that this necessary nature is freely posited by an I that subsequently attempts to close the gap between necessity (nature) and freedom (the I) – which is to remain an ideal, for if the gap were to close, necessity and freedom would both vanish[12]. The development in German idealism as Schelling begins to break with Fichte subsequently is to view not just the I, but also nature as free and self-determining in this way, ultimately to arrive at a fully self-determining absolute.

We can now understand where Kiyozawa is coming from when he argues—*pace* the first generation of Meiji intellectuals—that freedom is something that should *not* be restricted. Kiyozawa writes:

Freedom is not something that should be restricted. Some say that so-called "freedom" cannot avoid a degree of restriction, but this truly is a self-contradictory idea. They say that we are restricted by life, by wealth, by power, or by reputation, but life, wealth, power, and reputation are incapable of restricting us. Can we not easily transcend these if we are in the true spirit of freedom? (Kiyozawa, 1953: 321, vol. 6)

Kiyozawa argues that the purported "true freedom" of first-generation intellectuals such as Nakamura and Fukuzawa in fact contradicts itself and must hence be false. That is, in arguing that freedom must be restricted, they argue that freedom must be unfree – but freedom, truly to be freedom, must be freedom that is unrestricted, or freedom that is free. The intellectuals of the early Meiji, in thinking of us as "individuals" who are "free," show their ignorance of the true meaning of freedom, for in the phenomenal realm what appears as freedom can be none other than restriction. After all, in that realm, we are completely and utterly determined or "other-constituted" by our surroundings. Freedom that is free – true or absolute freedom – can only be found with the unlimited absolute, and only by living, so to say, in its "spirit," can we for Kiyozawa first shed the chains of the so-called "restrictions" of everyday existence and genuinely acquire freedom.

To be sure, what happens in Kiyozawa's hands is more than merely a discursive shift from discussing freedom in the context of politics to discussing it in the context of metaphysics. Kiyozawa in fact brings in metaphysical arguments against the validity of political liberalism – arguments that, since they turn freedom into a distant ideal towards which we strive, create the expectation that present reality must be marked by restriction. These arguments can accordingly be used to explain and even justify a socio-political *status quo* marked by unfreedom – that is, metaphysics could be used as a scheme through which to interpret the restrictions we face in our practical lives as in fact an integral part of reality. This, in a nutshell, was to be Tosaka's worry – and in his time, unlike in Kiyozawa's, much more had come to be at stake.

---

[12] Consider the account of Fichte's thinking in this regard in Breazeale, 2013: 151.

3. Tosaka: The Japanese Ideology

After Kiyozawa, the German idealist conception of freedom would increasingly become central to Japanese philosophical thought[13]. In Nishida Kitarō's (1870-1945) maiden work *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no Kenkyū*) from 1911 we read that God lies at the basis of all beings in the universe, that they all emerge from his internal nature, and that he is absolute freedom in this sense (Nishida, 1990: 163). Such language clearly reflects the typically German idealist concern with the Spinozist conception of substance. After *An Inquiry into the Good* Nishida would enter a period (often referred to as "voluntarist") in which he would typify reality in terms of "absolute free will"[14], explicitly acknowledging his debt to Fichte in doing so (Nishida, 1987a: xix). Even in his later work, when he appears to create a dichotomy between Western and Eastern philosophy in an attempt to create a distance between his thought and the former, we can observe how the German idealist idea of freedom as the self-determination of the absolute normatively keeps guiding his thought. In his last essay, the 1945 *The Logic of the Place of Nothingness and the Religious Worldview* (*Bashoteki Ronri to Shūkyōteki Sekaikan*), he writes how facing God in a "dialectic of mutual presence and absence" is the "Zen celebration of ordinary human experience" and as such "the dimension of absolute freedom, as the self-determination of the absolute present itself" (Nishida, 1987b: 111). The German idealist conception of freedom had become a cornerstone of Nishida's thought to such an extent that it could no longer be removed, even if he himself would have wanted to.

Already in his own time Nishida came to be associated with the standpoint of Eastern philosophy in general and Zen in particular, and after his death, when his thought was transmitted to the West, reading him as a Zen Buddhist philosopher became standard – a situation that more or less lingers on in Western scholarship on Nishida, although it is increasingly being challenged. While the realization is slowly dawning that reading Nishida as a Zen Buddhist philosopher may be one-sided at best and inaccurate at worst, in the 1935 *The Japanese Ideology* Tosaka had already rejected that label. As if speaking about the bulk of the scholarship on Nishida today, Tosaka remarks how Nishida's adherents think of his philosophy as "uniquely creative" and "Eastern," and that "certain persons have attempted to link it to Zen" (Tosaka, 1998a: 363-364), a suggestion Tosaka rejects straight out of hand. And not only that – Tosaka also rejects that Nishida philosophy might be religious, mystical, or fascist. But if Nishida philosophy is neither Zen, nor religious, nor mystical, nor fascist, nor unique, nor Eastern, what, then, is it? Tosaka writes:

---

[13] Although out of concern with space in this section I focus primarily on the German idealist conception of freedom as it occurs in Nishida, it must be noted that this conception of freedom is equally—or perhaps even more—important to Nishida's successor in Kyoto, Tanabe Hajime; consider the first chapter of Urai, 2024.

[14] See e.g., Nishida, 1987a: 141.

> *I wonder whether it [Nishida philosophy] is – and not surprisingly – simply Romantic. I mean to say, its Romanticism lies in [...] its way of proceeding in its interpretation of the real world. The intent of trying to interpret the world as a categoreal scheme is something that begins with Fichte. [...] Passing through Schelling, this line of thought ends in Hegel [...] (and to the extent that one views German Idealism as German Romantic philosophy, its first representative was Fichte.)* (Tosaka, 1998a: 365)

Tosaka clearly regarded Nishida philosophy as German idealist, seemingly going as far as to suggest that Nishida comes next in the line Fichte – Schelling – Hegel. Elsewhere in *The Japanese Ideology*, Tosaka writes that idealism camouflages itself as it propagates itself through history (Tosaka, 2020: 317), which would explain why Nishida philosophy is interpreted in so many ways *except* as a form of idealism. For Tosaka, that Nishida philosophy has come to take on the mantle of, for example, Zen is no more than a disguise to mask its true self, namely that it is none other than (German) idealism transplanted to Japanese soil. Positing it as "unique" is simply an attempt to erase this fact – one that does not fool Tosaka.

Tosaka categorizes Nishida philosophy in order to critique the role it played in 1930s Japan – that is, in a Japan rapidly turning to militarism and fascism. To be sure, this is different from saying that Nishida philosophy is itself fascist, which is, again, not Tosaka's intention.[15] The problem with Nishida philosophy in the context of 1930s Japan is, to use Marx' words (1994: 101), that it is not concerned with changing the world, but merely with interpreting it. By viewing Nishida philosophy as a form of German idealism, Tosaka is able to criticize it on the same grounds as Marx criticized the latter. In *The German Ideology* (*Die Deutsche Ideologie*) – which due to censorship could not be published until 1932 but was written in 1846 – Marx and Engels concerned themselves with German idealism, writing that since its post-Hegelian inheritors "... consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains of men [...], it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness" (Marx and Engels, 1998: 36). That is, for Marx and Engels, instead of dealing with (material) reality itself and securing freedom there, German idealism deals with *concepts of* reality and how those concepts may be free.

---

[15] See also the discussion in Nakata Steffensen, 2019.

In a similar vein, Tosaka writes that Nishida philosophy

> *deals only with the meaning that things have instead of dealing with real things themselves. Unless it actually deals with facts or things themselves, it cannot adequately deal with the meanings that things have; but at this point, independently of things themselves, Nishida philosophy thematizes only the meaning of things. [...] It is not a matter [for Nishida philosophy] of how society, or history, or nature exist but, rather, of what kind of meanings the concepts of society, history, or nature have; the problem is, what kind of status do those concepts have in a categoreal system of meaning?* (Tosaka, 1998a: 369)

For Tosaka, the problem with Nishida philosophy is that it does not deal with things, but only with the *meaning of* things. Tosaka argues that the meaning of things cannot be considered independently of the things themselves, by which he means the facts of material reality. What happens when meaning emancipates from the facts to which it is meant to be bound is that it begins to form an alternative world of meaning that exists purely for its own sake (Tosaka, 2020: 320-321). Tosaka regards Nishida as having constructed such a world of meaning which, no matter how brilliant, is ill-suited to deal with, for example, the pressing matter of whether society "develops in the direction of communism or is headed towards fascism" (Tosaka, 2020: 322). To Nishida philosophy, this can only be a problem for politics – not for philosophy. Nishida philosophy thus merely interprets reality, but has no real practical relationship to it.

This, however, is how Tosaka was evaluating Nishida philosophy in 1935. Nishida would be active longer than that (until his death in 1945), and in those years he developed his thinking in a manner that, I surmise, would have met with Tosaka's disapproval. As I already mentioned above, the later Nishida became embroiled in attempts to construct a crude dichotomy between Eastern and Western philosophy, and began to have his writings increasingly guided by the interpretation of (Zen and Pure Land) Buddhist texts through the lens of his own philosophy, thereby from Tosaka's point of view effectively employing the cheap methods of a whole host of vulgar intellectuals working in his shadow. These intellectuals are the ones to truly draw Tosaka's ire in *The Japanese Ideology*. By contrast, although Tosaka faulted Nishida philosophy for lacking a practical relationship to society, he did not view Nishida philosophy as posing an immediate danger to it. For that, Nishida's philosophy had by the 1930s become too academic – it no longer had the reach it had when it was more "journalistic" in character (Tosaka, 1998a: 364-365). While Nishida was off monologuing on the nature of consciousness through an analysis of the finer points of the judgment inside of his ivory tower – joined by a few others, perhaps – intellectuals much closer to society had started to do what Nishida philosophy was doing as well, but in much more insidious ways: constructing alternative worlds of meaning, not for philosophy's sake, but to begin denying the facts of material reality and even change them at their whims.

The problem with these other intellectuals (and by my lights – to a lesser extent, perhaps – the later Nishida) is that they are engaged in what Tosaka refers to as "literary liberalism," which he views as part and parcel of Japanese idealism – that is, the specific configuration idealism has taken on as the result of being transplanted to Japan. He writes:

The term "literary liberalism" expresses a phenomenon that is unique to Japan. Liberalism was originally a philosophical category at the level of politics. However, as the result of being solely carried by literary categories and of lacking any societal or historical materialist basis, [in Japan] the philosophical categories had been replaced by literary categories before anyone realized it. This is why in Japan today many men of letters are a kind of liberal (that is, they are "literary" liberals). The present condition, in which liberalism in Japan must find its support in the narrow world of literature instead of that of politics, tells the tale of how the liberalism characteristic of today's Japan is primarily accepted only as a literary category. (Tosaka, 2020: 331)

"The present condition" Tosaka speaks of is, of course, that of the militaristic and fascist turn Japan took in the years immediately leading up to the Second World War. And while Tosaka expresses his doubts whether in Japan political liberalism ever really became anything other than merely an idea – that is, whether it ever became an actual practice – it is clear that, by the time of writing *The Japanese Ideology*, freedom in the political sphere was no longer in the cards. This, however, was not a problem for the right-wing intellectual bourgeoisie, for what they were doing was simply fleeing into a self-constructed and therefore easily manipulable world of meaning to find freedom there. In that world, they were part of the great world-historical mission to carry the Japanese spirit across Asia, and any "facts" only had meaning insofar as they fitted in that scheme. Again, Tosaka's analysis is best compared to that of Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, where they *mutatis mutandis* write how the Young Hegelians "forget all other nations, all real events, and the *theatrum mundi* is confined to the Leipzig book fair and the mutual quarrels of 'criticism,' 'man,' and 'the unique'" (Marx and Engels, 1998: 64). That is, while the Young Hegelians believe that "Germans move in the realm of the 'pure spirit'," they ignore that this religious illusion is a "purely *national* affair of the Germans and has merely a *local* interest for Germany," pretending that they are part of the movement of world history (Marx and Engels, 1998: 63). (Ironically, contrary to what Marx and Engels argue here, by being exported to Japan, German idealism was to be anything but a national or local affair!)

Tosaka suggests that Japan's right-wing intellectuals found the tools for constructing an alternative world of meaning inside of liberalism itself. He describes liberal philosophy as a "logical system that rests on an idealistic interpretation of freedom," which concerns itself with nothing but a formal "freedom in general," and claims that the method for constructing this formal freedom is hermeneutic philosophy (Tosaka, 1998b: 341-342). Although this way of defining liberalism is *prima facie* rather puzzling, we can make sense of what Tosaka means if we assume that Fichte is his model for characterizing liberalist philosophy in this way. After all, Fichte referred to his as the "philosophy of freedom," and from Tosaka's Marxist perspective, it is easy to infer that he would have regarded Fichte as a philosopher who seeks freedom, not in the world of nature or experience – where, in good Kantian fashion, it cannot be found – but in a realm *beyond* nature, the realm of absolute subjectivity, which, if anything, is a veritable "categoreal scheme" in which the I can deem itself free and from which all of reality can be interpreted as its product.

For Tosaka, this basic hermeneutical scheme has a wide range of application, and in the hands of Japan's bourgeois intellectuals, it takes a literaturist turn such that it becomes a method "that uses literary representations and images to paint reality in fantastic colors, and raises these images into logico-philosophical concepts" (Tosaka, 1998b: 342). Parallel to this literaturism runs what Tosaka calls "philologism," which instead of representations and images converts words into concepts. These are the basic techniques right-wing intellectuals use to craft the "Japanese spirit," relying on texts from national history or, if they are religiously minded, Buddhist classics. All "Japanism" – Tosaka's name for those who engage in the literary and philological construction of the national Japanese spirit – is accordingly the product of textual hermeneutics, aimed at crafting a realm of freedom to serve as an alternative to a reality none too appealing.

Since Tosaka links liberalism to Japanism, the former cannot be used to oppose the latter, and Tosaka is adamant that they are a single constellation that ought to be opposed by materialism (Tosaka, 1998b: 346). As was the case with Kiyozawa, we should not take this to mean that Tosaka is an illiberal: Tosaka, too, is merely rejecting one form of liberalism to embrace another. Insofar as his advocation of materialism translates to an advocation of Marxism, and Marx was, if anything, a liberal thinker, Tosaka, like Kiyozawa, argues that we should get straight what *true* freedom is. And Tosaka's true freedom is closer to Kiyozawa's false freedom or the freedom of the first generation of Meiji intellectuals, namely freedom in the political sphere, or, to be more precise, the freedom of the *individual*. Freedom in the religious or metaphysical sphere to Tosaka can be nothing but *alienated* freedom, that is, the kind of freedom that has been projected onto an imaginary realm to cover up actual unfreedom.

4. Nishitani: Religion and Nothingness

That the Kyoto School ultimately does not emancipate from the German idealist conception of freedom but remains firmly in its orbit becomes clear in the thinking of its most prominent post-war representative, Nishitani. While Nishitani attempts to distance himself from German idealism, he – much like his teacher Nishida – remains inexorably tied up with it. That is, even though Nishitani situates himself beyond idealism and materialism, the idea that the absolute must be free in the sense of self-determining – which, we have seen, is part and parcel of German idealism – normatively guides his thinking. Like the later Nishida, Nishitani works from the dichotomy of East versus West, arguing that Western philosophy – with the exception of the German mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) – is incapable of properly conceiving the absolute and hence *true* freedom.[16] Nishitani primarily targets the philosophy that would seek to fill the spiritual vacuum left behind by the Second World War, namely existentialism – in particular Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980), who viewed the subject as radically free – but also, often implicitly, shows himself highly critical of Fichte's philosophy of freedom. In both cases, Nishitani's critique is that they seek freedom on the wrong side, namely that of the subject. Furthermore, Nishitani argues, much like Kiyozawa before him, that true freedom is to be found in the domain of religion, making Sartre's existentialism – which is atheist – problematic (although Søren Kierkegaard's (1813-1855) theistic existentialism would be equally problematic for absolutely opposing God and creation).

What, then, is true freedom, according to Nishitani? The most succinct summary of his view of freedom is given in the last page of *Religion and Nothingness*, where Nishitani writes:

> *By freedom, we meant the true freedom that is not simply a matter of freedom of the will. When freedom is viewed as residing in the operations of will power that man is conscious of within himself, then it is already a freedom reflected on the field of self-consciousness and hence transferred out of the home-ground of freedom itself. Freedom as it is in itself is not simply subjective freedom. Subjective freedom, which is the cornerstone of so-called liberalism, is not yet rid of the self-centered mode of being of man himself. True freedom is [...] an absolute autonomy on the field of emptiness, where "there is nothing to rely on." And this is no different from making oneself into a nothingness in the service of all things. It is this that sets it apart from the freedom of atheistic existentialism expounded by Sartre and others.* (Nishitani, 1983: 285)

---

[16] Ueda Shizuteru (1926-2019), Nishitani's student, would be even more radical in this regard, denying that Eckhart constitutes a genuine exception. See Ueda, 2022.

There is much to unpack here – more than I have space to. Let me for that reason focus on showing how Nishitani's understanding of freedom relates to its German idealist conception. To begin with, what does Nishitani mean by "true freedom" being "an absolute autonomy on the field of emptiness"? This can be made intelligible by returning to Kiyozawa, who by Nishitani's own admission is one of his sources of inspiration (Nishitani, 1983: 261). Kiyozawa, we have seen, argues that the only thing that can genuinely be called "free" is what he refers to as the "unlimited absolute." The unlimited absolute, again, is what transcends all phenomena to encompass them. The basic difference between the (relative) phenomena and the absolute results in two standpoints from which to consider reality. From the standpoint of the relative, the phenomena are ruled by laws of causality – be they of natural science or of karma – meaning that they subsist in relations of mutual dependence and are hence not free. By contrast, from the standpoint of the absolute, the very same phenomena cannot but be considered free.

Why does the standpoint of the absolute imply the freedom of phenomena that considered from the relative standpoint are unfree? If there is a difference between the absolute and the relative, then does this not imply that only the absolute is free, whereas the phenomena are not? Here Nishitani's reasoning is, like Kiyozawa's, driven by the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination. This doctrine holds that phenomena have no "self" to make them what they are. A more Buddhistic way of expressing this is that all phenomena are *empty* (hence Nishitani's expression "field of emptiness"). This does not mean that phenomena do not exist, but that they are not self- but other-constituted. For something to be self-constituted means for it to be what it is because of itself; for something to be other-constituted means for it to be what it is because of everything else. Properly speaking, then, for a phenomenon to be empty is for it to be *full* of everything other to it. From the standpoint of emptiness – which for Nishitani is the highest, that is, absolute standpoint – then, when we examine any phenomenon, we cannot but at once be examining everything other to that phenomenon, and hence are examining the all-embracing absolute, which has, so to say, "gathered" in that one phenomenon. Since the absolute is not exceeded by anything else but has everything else in it, it is not determined by something other to it, and is accordingly self-determining. But if the phenomenon directly is the absolute, then the phenomenon must be self-determining as well. Only on the field of emptiness, therefore, are the phenomena truly what they are, in and of themselves: the freely developing forms of emptiness.

On the basis of this view, Nishitani challenges "subjective freedom," which he regards as the "cornerstone of liberalism." As with Kiyozawa and Tosaka, we cannot understand Nishitani as rejecting liberalism *in toto* – what he does is reject a certain construction of liberalism in favor of his own. And as with Tosaka, Nishitani's understanding of liberalism appears to deviate from our present-day understanding of it as the political doctrine that there are individuals who have rights. And although Nishitani, as is evident from the above passage, seems to specifically target Sartre as someone who advocates "subjective freedom" – the radical freedom of the subject – I think that it is possible to trace Nishitani's understanding of liberalism, like Tosaka's, back to Fichte. That is, Nishitani can be read as someone who is highly critical of the model of a philosophy of freedom that is anchored solely in the self-identity of the absolute subject. Given the above, it is easy to see why. If phenomena are empty, then so must be the self – the self must be selfless. For Nishitani, the self can be the self because at its "home-ground" – the field of emptiness – it is not itself, which is to say that the selflessness of the self is the condition for the self to be itself, just like any phenomenon can be the phenomenon that it is because it is not that phenomenon without also being everything else. This is the reverse of Fichte's position, for in Fichte we find that the not-self is derivative of the self's absolute self-identity, that "I = I" (Fichte, 1982: 106). But if, as Nishitani argues, the I is fundamentally what it is because of the not-I, then we might say that the I is not what it is in virtue of its subjectivity, but in virtue of its objectivity – the empty subject, turned inside out to be filled up by the object, forms the absolute which, as a subject-object hybrid, is no longer recognizable as either this or that, but an indeterminate and in fact unknowable *subjectum* (substrate) beyond either the subject or the object. This *subjectum* – referred to as "absolute nothingness" by Nishida and Nishitani – is the field of emptiness that itself "relies on nothing," and is in that sense independent or truly free.

Since phenomena are truly free on the field of emptiness, the subject that takes itself to be a self-contained individual and free in virtue of that is for Nishitani at furthest remove from true freedom. Because absolute nothingness is freedom, and my corporeal self is ultimately grounded in it, when I believe myself to be free in virtue of my corporeality, which in fact traps me inside of my body, what I am actually experiencing is the self-alienating of the freedom of absolute nothingness, which is not here or there, but everywhere or, better yet, nowhere. By contrast, for Tosaka in religion we find nothing but an alienated freedom that masks the actual unfreedom of the individual in material reality, and with it the potential for that individual to liberate itself from its self-incurred captivity—since religion is the product of humankind. We here see the strong opposition between Tosaka's Marxism on the one hand and the idealism of Nishida and Nishitani on the other.

Coming to this point, I believe we can legitimately ask whether Nishitani does not radicalize Nishida in a direction that, from all possible directions in which the Kyoto School could have gone, is the least desirable. Tosaka's worries about the negligence of Nishida philosophy of actual socio-historical conditions and material reality are not addressed when Nishitani writes that "No matter how objectively true these phenomena are in themselves (for instance, as scientific cognition), in this very truth they are essentially illusory appearances" (Nishitani, 1983: 157). In fact, Nishitani is nothing if not literaturistic and philologistic, basing himself primarily in literary classics and Buddhist texts – which is a far cry from how Nishida for a long time conducted himself as a philosopher, namely as one that conversed primarily with the (mental) sciences. Nishida in fact took Tosaka's critiques very seriously, and on the basis of them earnestly attempted to develop a sense of subjectivity more robustly grounded in history. Tosaka himself appears to have considered Miki Kiyoshi (1897-1945) to be Nishida's most promising disciple, perhaps because Miki had become best known among his contemporaries precisely for his 1932 *Philosophy of History* (*Rekishi Tetsugaku*).

5. Conclusion

While the scholars of the early Meiji period oriented themselves towards the Anglo-Saxon conception of freedom, I hope to have clarified that a second generation of Meiji-era intellectuals – of which I have taken Kiyozawa as an important representative – was responsible for adopting and adapting to the Japanese context the alternative German idealist conception of freedom. This was not to be an isolated incident, for that alternative conception indeed became the cornerstone of the philosophy of certain key members of the Kyoto School, of which I have here focused on Nishida and Nishitani. Tosaka was one of the earliest to recognize the indebtedness of the Kyoto School to German idealism, identifying Nishida to *de facto* be one of its representatives on Japanese soil. He naturally had his own agenda: to show that the German ideology Marx and Engels had labored to critique was now *mutatis mutandis* responsible for supplying the intellectual tools required to construct and maintain realms of meaning in Japan, some of which were problematically pivoted around the national spirit.

What Kiyozawa, Tosaka, and Nishitani have in common is that they each combated forms of liberalism dominant in their time out of a concern for *true* freedom. That is, they all agreed on the importance of freedom, but disagreed on how it was to be construed. The reception of the Anglo-American conception of freedom by the first generation of Meiji intellectuals, too, was anything but passive. Indeed, in viewing freedom as something socially desirable only when it was subject to an appropriate degree of restriction, they went well beyond Mill and Spencer. Insofar as Kiyozawa relied on the German idealist conception of freedom to combat his predecessors, he also clearly attempted to go beyond it. As I have shown, that conception in Kiyozawa began to operate in a Buddhist context from which, ultimately, it would develop into the idea of freedom as the self-determination of absolute nothingness, which we encountered in Nishida and Nishitani. While this means that the German idealist conception of freedom was not merely passively appropriated, we must remain aware of the fact that, in consistently conceiving of the absolute as something that ought to be self-determining, that concept continually functioned as Nishida's and Nishitani's normative compass.

References and bibliography

Berlin, I. 1969. *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Breazeale, D. 2013. *Thinking Through the Wissenschaftslehre*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Descartes, R. 1984. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*, trans. by Murdoc, D., J. Cottingham, and R. Stoothoff, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fichte, J. G. 1982. *The Science of Knowledge*, trans. by Heath, P. and J. Lachs, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fujita, M. 2003. "Kiyozawa Manshi and Nishida Kitarō," in *The Eastern Buddhist*, 25(1/2): 42-56.

Godart, G. C. 2016. "Spencerism in Japan: Boom and Bust of a Theory", in Lightman, B. (ed.). *Global Spencerism: The Communication and Appropriation of a British Evolutionist*, Leiden: Brill: 56-77.

Godart, G. C. 2017. *Darwin, Dharma, and the Divine: Evolutionary Theory and Religion in Modern Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Hane, M. 1963. "Nationalism and the Decline of Liberalism in Meiji Japan", in *Studies on Asia*, 1 (4): 69-80.

Hane, M. 1969a. "The Sources of English Liberal Concepts in Early Meiji Japan", in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 24 (3): 259-272.

Hane, M. 1969b. "Early Meiji Liberalism. An Assessment", in *Monumenta Nipponica*, 24 (4): 353-371.

Havens, T. R. H. 1970. *Nishi Amane and Modern Japanese Thought*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Hegel, G. W. F. 2018. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Pinkard, T., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Howland, D. R. 2002. *Translating the West: Language and Political Reason in Nineteenth-Century Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Kant, I. 2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. by P. Guyer and Matthews, E., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kiyozawa, M. 1953. *Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshū*, 8 volumes, Kyoto: Hōzōkan.

Kiyozawa, M. 2022. "Skeleton of a Philosophy of Other-Power: A Draft," trans. by Prooi, D. and S. Urai, in *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy*, 7: 237-320.

Manent, P. 1995. *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, trans. by R. Balinski, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mander, W. J. 2011. *British Idealism: A History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mill, J. S. 2003. *Utilitarianism and On Liberty*, Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Marx, K. 1994. *Selected Writings*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Marx, K. and F. Engels. 1998. *The German Ideology*, Amherst: Prometheus Books.

Nakata Steffensen, K. 2019. "The Political Thought of the Kyoto School: Beyond 'Questionable Footnotes' and 'Japanese-Style Fascism", in Yusa, M. (ed.).

The Bloomsbury Research Handbook of Contemporary Japanese Philosophy, London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Moss, G. S. 2020. *Hegel's Foundation Free Metaphysics*, New York: Routledge.

Nelson, E. S. 2020. *Levinas, Adorno, and the Ethics of the Material Other*, Albany: State of New York University Press.

Nishida, K. 1987a. *Intuition and Reflection in Self-Consciousness*, trans. by Viglielmo, V. H., T. Yoshinori and J. O'Leary, Albany: State of New York University Press.

Nishida, K. 1987b. *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. by Dilworth, D., Honolulu: Hawai'i University Press.

Nishida, K. 1990. *An Inquiry into the Good*, trans. by Abe, M. and C. Ives, New Haven: Yale University Press.

Nishitani, K. 1983. *Religion and Nothingness*, trans. by Van Bragt, J., Berkeley: University of California Press.

Spencer, H. 2003. *Social Statics: Abridged and Revised, together with The Man versus The State*, Honolulu: University Press of the Pacific.

Spinoza, B. 2018. *Ethics Proved in Geometrical Order*, trans. by M. Silverthorne and Kisner, M. J., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tosaka, J. 1998a. "Is the 'Logic of Nothingness' Logic?: On the Method of Nishida Philosophy", trans. by Dilworth, D. A., V. H. Viglielmo, and A. J. Zavala, in *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy,* Westport: Greenwood Press: 362-371.

Tosaka, J. 1998b. "Preface to Intellectual Problems of Contemporary Japan: Japanism, Liberalism, Materialism", trans. by Dilworth, D. A., V. H. Viglielmo, and A. J. Zavala, in *Sourcebook for Modern Japanese Philosophy*, Westport: Greenwood Press: 339-347.

Tosaka, J. 2020. "On the Principles for a Critique of Hermeneutic Philosophy", trans. by Prooi, D., in *European Journal of Japanese Philosophy*, 5: 311-333.

Ueda, S. 2022. "Meister Eckhart's Mysticism in Comparison with Zen Buddhism", trans. by Moss, G. S., in *Comparative and Continental Philosophy*, 14(2): 128-152.

Urai, S. 2024. *Tanabe Hajime: Shakaiteki Genjitsu to Kyūsai no Tetsugaku* [Tanabe Hajime: Philosophy, Social Reality, Salvation], Kyoto: Kyoto Daigaku Gakujutsu Shuppankai.

The author

Dennis Prooi studied Philosophy at the Erasmus University Rotterdam and Asian Studies at Leiden University. He earned his PhD in the Humanities from the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology with a dissertation on self-cultivation in the work of Kiyozawa Manshi. His primary research interest is modern Japanese philosophy.